

September 24, 2006
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 20

Wisdom 1:16-2:1 ❖ James 3:16-4:6 ❖ Mark 9:30-37

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We live in an era where the “fast lane” has taken over the whole highway of life. Bo Lozzof, author of “It’s a Meaningful Life”, has said that “we live in an age where the ordinary seems extraordinary, and what was once unimaginable has become commonplace.” It is a world where time to watch a sunrise, or time to eat a meal with our family, and actually enjoy it, is so rare that it is romanticized in TV commercials. It is ALSO a world that moves at a relentless pace, a world with a level of materialism and creature comforts that would exceed Cleopatra’s wildest dreams, a world with an incredible degree of self-absorption, and a world where technology and violence make the destruction of our entire eco-sphere are very imaginable possibility.

In one of his later books, *Beauty*, John O’Donohue writes that “*our times are driven by the energies of the mechanical mind... [and where the mechanical mind] dominates, the habit of gentleness dies out. We become blind: nature is rifled, politics eschews vision and becomes the obsessive servant of economics, and religion opts for the mathematics of system and forgets its mystical flame.*” Sound familiar?

To put it another way, we live in a context that thinks the world is flat. Really! I’ve been trying to read this book by Thomas Friedman, supposedly a “brief history of the twenty-first century” – and the title is “The World is Flat,” which is what Friedman concluded after a trip to India to look at outsourcing, technology and globalization.

Perhaps this “flattening” of the world started with the Modern era. I think, for example, of a little book by John Locke called “The Reasonableness of Christianity.” Locke was trying to argue that the revelation of the Christian Gospel was accessible to reason and logic. Then a year or two later another book came out, “Christianity not Mysterious” by John Tolland, which took the argument one step further and argued that ALL of religion could be accessed by reason and logic, and if something wasn’t “logical,” is was false, mere superstition, and could be discarded.

So gradually, Modernity striped the religious life of all of its meaning, all of its mystery, and all of its beauty, until what seems left is a “reasonable” wasteland of “morality”, and where even the morality it proclaimed was no more than the cultural expectations of the time.

But Friedman is wrong, and Tolland was wrong. The world, the real world is NOT flat, and Christianity, REAL Christianity, isn't necessarily "reasonable." The "real" world has a vertical dimension, a "higher" and a "lower", and as spiritual beings, it is critically important to that we NOT lose this ability to know that the "higher" does indeed exist.

Back to John o'Donohue: "*When we awaken to the call of beauty*" [and for "beauty" you can read any of things: holiness, mindfulness, God]... "*When we awaken to the call of beauty, we become aware of new ways of being in the world... when beauty touches our lives, the moment becomes luminous... With swift, sheer grace, it is like a divine breath that blows the heart open.*"

Although this "blowing open of the heart" touches on all of our readings today, it does so most clearly in the reading from the Letter of James. If this letter is read from the standpoint of a "flat" world, all we see is a series of statements on morality, injunctions against envy, ambition, covetousness, and wickedness. Now, even at this level, we have a very powerful and challenging reading: "*For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.... Those conflicts and disputes among you... do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?*" [James 3:14, 4:1] These are powerful words, and I would say, that they speak as powerfully to the community that we are here at St. Wilfrid's today as they must have spoken to the original recipients of the letter. But the key that the author of the letter is on to something even deeper is in the alternate set of phrases: "The WISDOM FROM ABOVE that is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality of hypocrisy." [James 3:17]

Sure, some of us yearn for order; and of course, "morality" has its place. But what we really HUNGER for is that "blowing open of the heart", that "wisdom from above," that "righteousness of the godly" that we read about in Wisdom. A connection with something higher. Something that permeates our lives with meaning, with beauty, with a sense of relationship with the sacred and with each other. What Jesus is saying, what the letter of James is saying, what the "wise" in the book of wisdom really GET, is that TRUE morality, the values of the Kingdom, the message of the Gospel, all of these "come from above", and bring a completely new orientation into the lives of those who receive them.

Take a moment, and think back to a time when you have known moments of meaning, of clarity, of that poignant, clear, transcendent beauty. I would say that it is only at these moments that we really find, within ourselves, a capacity to move away from negative emotions, and really "get" the "how" and "why" to relate with each other with a deep respect, compassion, and love...

And these are precisely the virtues that we are called to embody as Christian community. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." The dilemma is, on our own, none of us can reach this, because these are values that the "flat" world will never understand.

The fact is that NONE of us can FORCE ourselves to NOT be jealous, or NOT feel ambition. None of us can force true peace, or true virtue, or true gentleness into our souls. And yet, when we find ourselves closer to those states where we touch the holy, we come to a state where we KNOW, deep down and real, that the only disposition that is congruent with this place of meaning is a disposition of love, compassion, and gentleness.

So we turn to Jesus. Always, we answer these knotty issues by turning to Jesus. In today's Gospel reading, even given the fact that the disciples, arguing about "who will be the greatest" obviously didn't "get" what Jesus had been trying to teach them, Jesus simply sat down, calls the twelve, and begins to speak: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." "Whoever welcomes me..." - notice that there are no "shoulds" here, no scolding, no condemnation. Jesus makes every one of these statements with a profound sense of respect for people's freedom and dignity, even if means allowing them to make mistakes. This doesn't mean that at times Jesus didn't use extraordinarily strong language, because he did, but as a TEACHER, Jesus was always profoundly respectful of those around him!

So what we see in Jesus is precisely this "wisdom from above" – a wisdom that was gentle, "willing to yield", and that ultimately led him to relinquish his own safety and undergo execution on a cross for the sake of the larger purposes of God's rule. In a sense, Jesus meets all the standards of his own teaching in his death. That was the point he was trying to make with his disciples, and that was precisely the point that his disciples were unable to hear.

The focus I want to keep is, once again, this sense of connection with the higher. Jesus was not acting out of a deep sense of "rational morality." Jesus' words and actions, Jesus' very life, and especially his death, all of this came about, because Jesus was profoundly connected with the Father. This was the source of Jesus' power, of his knowledge, and of his authority. Jesus breathed this divine beauty, and every one of his words, every one of his teachings, was, and is, intended to connect us back to that place of meaning and holiness.

In Christ, we are called to move beyond the values of a flat world. In Christ, we find the connection with the higher. In Christ, we find, finally, freedom from envy and ambition, freedom to be the people we want to become, freedom to be the community that God calls us to be.