

Bringing wisdom from above down to earth

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

September 19, 2021

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

I am grateful to those who reached out to me, sharing how difficult, at times seemingly impossible it is, this notion of loving the one who is utterly different from us. Loving someone who politically, ideologically, fundamentally, and philosophically differs from us. Don't forget that the original Jesus community, millennia ago, had to struggle to coexist with problematic neighbours. They didn't just coexist, God's Spirit *told them* that they had to welcome these problematic people into their close-knit community (remember the whole scandal faced by Peter and Paul, devout Jews, having to eat food in common with impure Gentiles?).

A day from now, our country will all have voted, some of us earnestly committed to a party that we hope will lead our country through these challenging times. But, maybe we look at political signs on lawns that reflect a value system that we cannot fathom.

"How can *they* want that?"

"What are *those* people thinking?"

Notice my emphasis on "those" people – we dehumanize, if even subtly, the other, the different.

Does the love that Jesus teaches require that we love even those we feel are reprehensible? The quick answer is "yes" – the more complex part of the answer requires us to unpack our own baggage, our cognitive categories that help us make sense of the world. Some of that cognitive categorizing might be helpful, but much of it we need to unlearn, if we are going to love.

I'm here, my dear friends, not to offer slick solutions to perplexing problems, but to try to ask good questions that help us to listen for God's voice in our unique situations. I'm here also to remind you, and me as well, that the voices like the one of James in the Bible might just help you and I to live more faithfully, more lovingly, as God's children. No child of God more important, none less important to God, including those people who annoy us, baffle us, even harm us.

You might not know that today, September 19, 2021, marks the beginning of a week of Prayer for Peace in Palestine and Israel¹, started by The World Council of Churches. It was this body that I worked for when I was an Ecumenical Accompanier in Palestine and Israel.² The WCC asks Christians around the world to pray for peace. Not a partisan or political kind of peace, but instead to pray for, to dare to believe that, God's Shalom, can take hold among Israelis and Palestinians. Justice, peace, a sense of safety replacing fear, "othering".

¹ For more information about this important week from a United Church of Canada perspective, please visit <https://united-church.ca/worship-special-days/world-week-peace-palestine-and-israel>

² **Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI)** - The World Council of Churches created this programme in 2002 based on a letter and an appeal from local church leaders to create an international presence in the country. For more information <https://eappi.org/en>

It is an audacious claim; I will admit that we must pray for, believe in, and work for such a vision. Can you believe in this seemingly impossible peace enough to become a stakeholder in it? Your answer to this question might be directly related to how willingly you believe that God's loving redemption is working in the sometimes-murky politics of Canada.

I'm wondering if, whatever government emerges – will our government finally fulfill our collective moral obligation to address those 94 Calls to Action gifted to us by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission? Our United Church of Canada believes it possible, especially the calls of Indigenous to churches to educate ourselves and to speak and act for reconciliation. Can believe in this, or does it feel like pie in the sky?



Back to Palestine and Israel for a minute, this is a photo snapped by me in 2006. I met these two in a tiny West Bank village called Nu'aman – Efrat and Amiel – both respected Jewish academics who regularly defy their Israeli government by entering Palestine to collect stories and gather facts for human rights reports.³

These two met my team in this village to share stories of homes demolished for an Israeli checkpoint; the new military infrastructure was soon to create a great hurdle for Palestinian elementary school children – every day having to walk through a foreign checkpoint, unfriendly border police with their guns, all to get from one village to the next one to go to school.

Beyond this unimaginable reality that we heard about, what struck me was how calm, how normal, and “non-activist” they came across. They didn't speak in hyperbole, which I sometimes hear from the more extreme activists. Dr. Amiel Vardi has since been arrested several times by his authorities, for simply being an Israeli demonstrating peacefully with Palestinians.

I reflect on today's words from James, not at all telling us to go out and *do good*. James instead seems to be calling us to put the time and work into our spiritual lives: when we want to lash out or assert power, we are told to hold our tongue if only long enough to await God's wise words.

Today's really poignant question: *Whose wisdom do we value most?* Is it the world's wisdom that shows itself in envy, self-absorption, fear and desire for power? Or, James asks, do we value wisdom *from above*? I know, those are clouds and space above. Wisdom from above is perhaps translated as being of our Creator.

That wisdom, James says, is revealed when we are:

peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy...⁴

³ Dr. Vardi founded this organization, called Ta'ayush (the Hebrew word loosely translates as “life in common”)

⁴ James chapter 3, verse 17 *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

In Palestine that day, I was agitated, angry hearing the stories. Anything but grounded in God's wisdom. For Israelis and Palestinians and people around the world who daily speak out for an end to the occupation of Palestine from a place of love and peace – this is holy wisdom.

Similarly, when I think of the First Peoples of this land, I describe myself as a descendant of colonizers, and speak about the United Church as complicit in the evil Residential School system – for some of us, that feels politically charged. I speak it because it is truth, it comes from sincere place that earnestly prays for Reconciliation and a radical new reality. Will I live out that intention I express?

Hearing James challenges us to decide: Which wisdom will you and I choose – the world's, or God's. There is so much judgment we learn in this world, young and old. Just this past week I was visiting in the Emergency Department. I happened to be in the waiting room as a beleaguered parent paced, holding an upset child. At first, I watched curiously, sympathetically. When the parent got into a very heated argument on the phone – yelling, swearing – my judgmental side reared its ugly head. I felt helpless, wondering what I could do. So, I watched and prayerfully “held” that parent and child. My reactive, helpless, judgmental voice gave way to care and love.

This is of course a bit of an idealized dualism, a contrast that James sets up a dualism. As if we ever could tap into the pure wellspring of God Wisdom. Perhaps, though, we can step back from the pressures, the political sensationalism, the pressures of life, think about Jesus of today's Gospel also, facing judgmental, opinionated, self-centred, disciples.

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.⁵

Wow. Who is the child that we need to welcome, to love? As we vote, as we engage in conversations; as we balance our budgets, who is most vulnerable? The many living in tents beside this church building? That swearing, fed up parent in the ER with child? Maybe it is the anti-vaxxer who still needs more information from a patient medical practitioner, or you. Wisdom from above begins by seeing Christ in every face we meet. Amen.

⁵ Mark chapter 9, verse 37. New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).