

Reflection on Wisdom, September 28, 2025

A reading from the Epistle of James, Chapter 3, 13-17

Who is wise and knowledgeable among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be arrogant and lie about the truth.

This is not wisdom that comes down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.

For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Friends, there is so much information running through my mind right now. My 11 days at Luther Seminary, while just the beginning of a long journey toward ordination, did everything to confirm to me that I'm on the right path. Just yesterday, in one of my infamous moments of extreme self-doubt, Rona, as a friend and mentor, didn't even try to tell me I was wrong, but instead offered a blessing. Trust your call. So, if pre-reading about 2000 pages on everything from Latin American liberation theology to the very conflicted assertions of St. Augustine for 20 hours of intense discussion seemed like a GOOD thing, and it did...she's probably right.

One of the first things you dig into in a Lutheran Seminary is, of course, the Protestant Reformation. The short, short version is that several 16th century scholars and priests, including Martin Luther, became quite

uncomfortable with not only the Medieval Catholic Church's consolidation of religious and political power in Rome, to Germany's detriment, but with the sale of indulgences to fund the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica; a pay-for-play scheme taking cash in exchange for promises of salvation. Luther's final straw came through exposure to the preaching of German friar Johann Tetzel, who was particularly adept at making potential buyers "feel guilty if they did not seize the opportunity," reminding audiences of their parents and ancestors "clamoring for help" in purgatory and needing just one financial contribution to send them into paradise, as described in Scott Hendrix's biography of Luther.

Tetzel even coined a catchy jingle "as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs". By the way, for the sake of accuracy, the words ring and spring rhyme just as well in German. This was enough to push Luther over the edge, and he drafted a placard with 95 theses for debate, angrily tacked it to the door of Wittenburg's Castle Church, and waited for a response. He got one.

Key amongst Luther's assertions was that any pardoning power was reserved for God, and God alone. Luther bluntly asked "If the pope does have the power to release anyone from purgatory, why in the name of love does he not abolish purgatory by letting everyone out?" That challenge to papal authority led to Luther, through a series of trials, being declared a heretic by the Roman Catholic Church, and an outlaw by the Holy Roman Empire. Unfortunately for the forces of Empire, a youthful base, German friends in high places, and the exploding popularity of the recently-invented printing press kept Luther's movement strong.

I think there was more to it, though, than new technology and friends in high places. I think there was an innate and widespread sense of the evil that comes with the self-serving practice of selling salvation. *For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind*, says James.

Imagine the response of *this* church if I changed our offertory practice to insinuate that your worth to this community was determined by the size of your monetary contribution. If I promised some sort of spiritual reward in exchange for cash money. Some of you would no doubt walk right out because we're New Englanders, and it's just plain bad taste. Beyond that, though, I think in this congregation, there would be deep concern that people were being exploited, and I think that would be the primary impetus for the emergency executive board meeting we'd have within days.

Isn't that sense of right and wrong the God-given wisdom James speaks of? *Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.* You are indeed a wise congregation. Everything Tim spoke of shows good works done with gentleness born of wisdom. You have made generous contributions that have directly benefited those on the margins, not because you were promised some sort of reward for it, but because you knew it was right. It was God's work. It is wise.

Inspired by *the wisdom from above - pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.*

Today, today we are about to walk out to the memorial garden and welcome a new member into this community of faith, promising our love, support and care, and asking for God's blessing that she may live into a life of discipleship, a life of service, based on love, and everything right in the world.

Let this baptismal practice be guided by the wisdom expressed here today, our generosity not because we want something in return, but because we want all to live in a world more aligned with the kingdom of God, sown in peace, by those who make peace.

Amen?

