

Unconventional Wisdom

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James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

One of the most unique contributions our Presbyterian tradition has made to the broader church is the notion of calling, and leadership. We quickly jumped on board with Martin Luther's notion of the priesthood of all believers, that all of us, by virtue of our baptisms, were called and gifted to be leaders in the church.

We Presbyterians expanded from Luther (and some took it further than us). We not only have embraced the priesthood of all believers, but we have identified three biblical offices – deacon, elder and minister – and we have determined that each is an office to which people called and gifted are ordained. It can get confusing when you are trying to explain that to your Roman Catholic neighbor or Methodist cousin, but it's true.

And though we often forget this, and sometimes behave as if we forget it, we have said that there is no hierarchy in these ordained offices. There are distinct responsibilities, to be sure, between a deacon and an elder and a minister, but those distinctions aren't stratified.

More broadly, we Reformed and Presbyterian Christians have contributed a unique notion of vocation in general – that all are given gifts to use for the common good, and that no gift, no task, no role, is more important or less important than any other.

But the same is very true in terms of ordination. Remember that. It is so true that we ask the same ordination questions to all who are called, with only slight variations. The same questions that were asked of me yesterday will be asked to a fabulous group of elders and deacons in just a few minutes. The questions are important. They matter. They also help us be secured in our reputation of how verbal we can be, because they are long, and, in a few cases, need a grammarian to help us follow them. Nonetheless, I love them, for all their verbosity. In fact, you can find about 10 scintillating pages of a dissertation somewhere deep in the recesses of a seminary library in Evanston, Illinois, and perhaps even deeper on a bookshelf just upstairs, that outline the history of these questions. We made a big shift in 1967 when we also more formally changed our understanding of biblical authority and the role of our theology.

I'd invite you to pay extra attention as they are asked again today. And whether or not you are a new deacon or elder, or a current one, or a former one, or whether you've not been any of those things, listen carefully. Their application is broad. Listen for words like trust. Accept. Receive. Listen for words like friend. Neighbor. Love. Reconciliation. Some of the questions are about content, what we believe. Some are about behaviors, how we live together.

My favorite two questions are the last two. Both were additions in the 1960's. *Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?* It is a curious combination. Is peace unity? Is unity peace? How can you have peace and unity if you are also seeking purity? Is purity purity of thought or behavior or both? For five years I served on a denominational entity called the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church, which was tasked to address difficult issues of ordination and belief at a time when the church was seen as ready to either explode or implode or both. We did neither. Yet we are still seeking to "further," not "achieve" but "further," peace, and unity, and purity. And the last question.

Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love? Energy, intelligence, imagination, love. Again, a curious combination. There are no minutes that record the author of that question's name. I wonder – if you were to identify the four most pressing qualities, traits, for a church leader, or a leader period, would these be yours? Do you want your company president, your state senator, your volleyball coach, to lead with energy, intelligence, imagination and love? If so, why? If not, why not? And even for church offices, is this the best list? I remember an elder asking me right before the day of his ordination – somewhat cheekily – if it was a problem that he only had three out of the four. I said that it depended on what was the deficiency – energy or imagination or intelligence or love.

And what do any of those mean? Energy – does that mean a tirelessness, a relentlessness? Or something different – a passion, a commitment? Imagination. I love that. Seeing things not as they are but as they might be. Leading a church to think outside of the box, or thinking with innovation inside the box. Love. Devotion. Sacrifice. A deep neighborliness. Like peace, unity and purity, I envision a creative interplay. Energy, intelligence, imagination and love. We all have all of them, all of us. Believe that. And all are needed to help the church live into its vision of who it is called to be and what it is called to do.

You might have noticed that I skipped "intelligence." How intelligent of you. For many reasons I've been thinking of intelligence. In our moment in time. In our

history. In our church. In the church. And how much it is needed, and how whoever formulated those ordination questions knew – perhaps more than they could ever know – how much the kind of intelligence we need is needed.

What does intelligence mean to you? The CIA – the Central Intelligence Agency? Book smarts? Common sense? Does intelligence mean knowing things, or understanding things, or being able to figure things out? We are taught to love God with our minds. Is that what serving with intelligence means?

When I think about this, two other words come to mind: wisdom and discernment. Both suggest to me a capacity deeper than being able to do well on Jeopardy, but rather a depth of understanding, the ability to see clearly.

That intelligence is a gift we all have, I believe, a gift of the Spirit. And it is needed now. I think about this a lot these days. With competing inputs, about the vaccine, about who caused what and how we can fix it, about so many things, *and* with people questioning leaders and institutions – how do we decide, how do we learn, how do we discern? *And*, how does that intelligence lead us to act, faithfully?

The letter of James, which we have been exploring over these recent weeks, has grabbed me in a way it hasn't before, perhaps because of the moment in which we find ourselves. An ethic as much as a doctrine about how we are to live in the world. This morning James is talking about wisdom. James asks, "who is wise and understanding among you?" Not, who is smart. Wise and understanding. The ability to look deeply and discern, to comprehend.

Why does this matter? Such wisdom leads to a transformed life. "Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom." Live life with gentleness, gentleness born of wisdom. That is, take it all in. Discern. Comprehend. And then rather than using that intelligence for gain, to get the upper hand, to show people how much smarter you are, more clever, live with gentleness.

For another day is a discussion about gentleness – how that is different than being a doormat, or letting others run roughshod. But gentleness, born of wisdom.

James understands that wisdom can be used poorly, with motives other than gentleness. James understands that the intelligence called for in our ordination

questions is not an automatic thing. “But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come 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 a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.”

Earthly wisdom, per James, magnifies “bitter envy and selfish ambition.” That’s not what we want in our leaders – government, business, education, and certainly the church. This is what wisdom from above, as James calls it, looks like: peaceable, gentle, full of mercy.

Doug Bratt writes that “Such wisdom is...not the ‘intelligence’ to which our culture generally links it. Wisdom is, instead, God’s gift of looking at God, the world, and our neighbors from God’s perspective...” Looking at things from God’s perspective.

Theologian Christine Pohl writes about “living truthfully,” which is something very akin to what James is pondering, living with gentleness born of wisdom. Pohl notes that “the Quaker tradition offers time-tested suggestions for fostering truthful living. They include these four: (1) Listen ‘for the truth in the words of others’; (2) Speak the truth as you understand it with ‘cordiality, kindness, and love’; (3) Avoid ‘gossip, tale bearing, breaking confidences, or the disparagement of others’; and (4) Resist ‘temptations to falsehood, coercion, and abuse.’”

I wonder, in this divided and divisive moment, what a commitment to such truthfulness would look like. I wonder, as we are encouraged not to love our neighbor, but to distrust them, what relying on wisdom would look like. I wonder, as our new church leaders vow to lead with “intelligence,” what it would look like not only to do that, but to put our collective intelligence, our wisdom, our discernment, into action, in our own lives, in our lives in the church, and then to allow such unconventional wisdom to make a difference in the world so hungry right now for the gentleness that is surely a gift of the Spirit. Amen.