

Text: James 3:13-18, 4:7-10
Title: The Good Life
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Roger Allen Nelson

Jack Handy is an American humorist best known for his deep thoughts. You may remember him from Saturday Night Live. Over elevator music and images of mountain lakes he would offer a deep thought ~ a satirical take on the syrupy slogans of the self-help industry. For example:

Before you criticize someone, you should walk a mile in their shoes. That way, when you criticize them, you're a mile away and you have their shoes.

Consider the daffodil, and while you're doing that I'll be over here going through your stuff.

To me, it's a good idea to always carry two sacks of something when you walk around. That way, if anybody says, "Hey, can you give me a hand?" You can say, "Sorry, got these sacks."

I could go on, but you're not here for sermon-as-bad-stand-up-comedy. Jack Handy was poking fun at proverbial wisdom:

that a few lines could hold life-altering truth,
that the right key can unlock life's secret,
that the good life can be tapped by right knowledge, right method, right diet, right belief, right behavior....

If we could just get it right.

Dear friends, let's begin with the premise that we desire the same thing.

We all want the good life. We all long for peace, meaning, and joy. We may search for it in different ways. We may get sidelined by disappointment, exhaustion, cynicism, or boredom. We may get distracted; we may surrender. We may chase after it in ways that are twisted and counterproductive, but we're all longing for the same wholeness, the same fundamental healing, and the same essential good. Saint Augustine called it the *summum bonum*, the "supreme good."

And, there are all sorts of ways that we pursue the good life: religion, running, diet, education, experiences, relationships, sex, self-help, money, meditation, books, travel, drugs, family, etc. In some way we are all chasing after the same thing.

In our text, James links the good life to wisdom.

Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.
(NRSV)

That's not the good life as smart, shrewd, or savvy.

That's not the good life as ambition, accomplishment, or acquisition.

That's not the good life as getting it right.

That's the good life as an extension of wisdom.

And, that's a far cry from our culture's emphasis: Get good grades, so you can get into a good school, so you can get a good job, so you make a good salary, so you can enjoy a good life, and raise good kids, who get good grades, who....

*Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.
(NRSV)*

Therefore, this morning let's consider: If the good life is born of wisdom expressed in deeds done in humility how then do we pursue that? (Again?) If the good life is born of wisdom expressed in works done in gentleness how then do we pursue the good life?

James sets up a dichotomy: good versus evil, light versus dark, earth versus heaven, wisdom versus folly....

On the one side, bitter envy and selfish ambition are the byproducts of that which is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. They in turn will lead to chaos. But, on the other side, wisdom, that is a gift of God, will be peaceful, thoughtful of others, submissive, merciful, and authentic. It will lead to things that are straight, upright, and in line with God's will.

James doesn't fudge or dabble in the gray spaces. It's black and white.

This is the way of God. That's the way of the world.

This is the route to the good. That's the route to a mess.

This is the way to life. That's the way to death.

One wishes it were that simple....

But, against that dichotomy, let me offer three points.

In [The Blood of the Lamb](#), Peter DeVries wrestles with the demons of his Calvinist upbringing. He writes about how Reformed folks can be combative and schismatic with regard to church matters ~ always fracturing over some dispute. In the novel, an uncle, with a heavy Dutch brogue, recalls an old proverb, "Rotten wood you can't split."

The deep thought being that those who are right and rigid are good wood. Those who are theologically mushy and open are dead wood. And, good wood is easy to split. But...

But, sometimes things fracture because of envy, ambition, inflexibility, self-righteousness, judgment, and an unwillingness to accept others. Sometimes good splitting wood is not a thing to be celebrated.

James is writing about a wisdom that is rooted in community. The descriptors of the good life are not about individualism or private practice but they have to do with people being

together, living together, finding unity together, making peace together. The world knows division. The way of God knows peace.

James is not suggesting that we're doormats to be trampled over, or that we're willy-nilly mush, but that there is a purity, not of dogma or demand, but of love. For James, the good life is lived in relation to others....

Peacemaking, not quarrelsome.
Considerate, not self-centered.
Submissive, not stubborn.
Distended of mercy (Greek), not full of self.
You get the idea.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in The Cost of Discipleship, puts it this way:

The followers of Christ have been called to peace. ... And they must not only have peace but also make it. And to that end they renounce all violence and tumult. In the cause of Christ nothing is to be gained by such methods. ... His disciples keep the peace by choosing to endure suffering themselves rather than inflict it on others. They maintain fellowship where others would break it off. They renounce hatred and wrong. In so doing they overcome evil with good, and establish the peace of God in the midst of a world of war and hate

Dear friends how can we make peace in our families, in our relationships with friend and neighbor, and in our political discourse? For that is part of the good life born of a gentle wisdom.

Second.

In our translation James 3:18 reads this way:

Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

What's lost in translation is an on-going quality. As you continue to make peace, righteousness is being reaped in you.

The Chicago Marathon is in two weeks. If you've never been I'd encourage you to skip church and go watch people of all sizes, shapes, and ages run and shuffle for 26.2 miles. It is a remarkable colorful parade of humanity.

For some the joy will be in the achievement. They will complete their first marathon and check it off their bucket list. Nothin' wrong with that; God bless 'em. However, for many runners the joy is not in the completion, but in the journey. The joy is in the running ~ day in and day out, week in and week out, year in and year out. It is not about an accomplishment but a way of being. There is an ongoing daily gift to running.

The good life for James is clearly not something that we accomplish, but it is being planted in us ~ it happens in the running. The verb here is passive and continual. As you pursue peace God continues to do the planting in you. There is an ongoing daily gift to it.

Sometimes we call this “sanctification,” that life long process wherein we are being shaped by the Spirit in conformity with the image of God.

John Calvin writes about it this way:

Sanctification is not instantly completed in us on the first day, but that we make progress in it through the whole course of our life, till at length, God, having taken away from us the garment of the flesh, fills us with his righteousness.

We don't arrive.

We never check it off our bucket list.

The good life is a continual journey.

1. The good life is lived with others in unity, in making peace.
2. The good life is an ongoing gift of God ~ righteousness is being sown in us.

And finally....

As the early church was determining what to include in the Bible, James was always on the fringe. Martin Luther famously called it “an epistle of straw” because there was “no gospel character to it.”

There's little grace,
there's little forgiveness,
there's little Jesus.

At the very end of an essay about preaching this text a pastor wrote, “If you haven't done it yet, this would be good place to mention Christ in your sermon.” The wisdom offered is to throw-in a little Jesus.

You see, the dilemma with James is that it's full of imperatives: do this, don't do that. Watch your tongue. Be compassionate. Make peace. And the wisdom of James easily becomes one more thing to do in pursuit of the good life. Our text ends with these lines:

*Submit yourselves, then, to God.
Resist the devil....
Come near to God....
Wash your hands you sinners...
Purify your hearts...
Grieve, mourn, and wail...
Humble yourselves before the Lord....*

Whew!

The good life as a laundry list of things to do.

Dear friends, the good news is that Jesus Christ is the wisdom of God. Christ, made peace, submitting himself even unto death ~ that we might be made right with God. Therefore, you are forgiven and free.

Ours is but to follow after Christ in gratitude ~ for the supreme good is embodied in Christ. Every imperative is lived in that gracious light. The good life is lived in Christ.

So....

May we seek peace with others, as Christ made peace.

May we continually submit ourselves to God, as Christ submitted to God.

May we know the wisdom of God poured out in Jesus Christ.

That seems like a good life.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Note: I am indebted to an essay by Stan Mast. He pointed me toward the quote from Peter DeVries and offered the line about "a good place to mention Christ."