

## **It All Boils Down To This**

Mark 9:30-37

James 3:13-4:8a

A few weeks ago I was talking to my father on the phone and he told me that he had found something interesting in the paper and cut it out and sent it to me. That's something Dad's done for as long as I can remember. He gets up every morning and reads the Wall Street Journal and a couple of other newspapers, and any time he stumbles across an article he thinks my brother or I might be interested in, he sends it to us. So I thanked him and asked what it was, and that's when he began to have trouble. "Well, I don't really know. I can't explain it." I hear that from him more and more these days as his Alzheimer's progresses. The later it gets in the day, or when he gets stressed, he has difficulty finding words, remembering what something is called. So I told him not to worry about it, that I would look forward to getting it, whatever it was.

Well, this is what it was: an ad for a church in Tucson called The Cool Church. As the name suggests, this church is all about being cool. They have cool music, inflatables for the kids, teaching that "will really be helpful in your life," and best of all, they never, ever pass the offering plate! No wonder this 85-year-old Episcopalian had difficulty explaining what it was! I'm not sure I could have explained it, either.

I've thought a lot about that ad and how that church is going about selling itself, and it raises the same question I have when I try to figure out why people come to a church or leave a church: what are people looking for in a church? What do you want out of a church, expect of a church? But what happens when you answer that question, I think, is that it leads you to ask an even deeper question, the very same question that James is asking us to take a long, hard, honest look at today: what do you want out of life? What do you hope for, long for? Really. Honestly.

When you read between the lines in this ad for The Cool Church, it seems to me that it would appeal to people who really don't want to have much expected of them. The staff's all paid – there're no volunteers – and they're there to see to it that all your needs are met, that you have a pleasant and enjoyable experience. They aren't going to put you on any committees, ask you to look after someone else's children, help keep the place clean. They aren't even going to ask you for any money. It's church made easy. How cool is that?! And not even God expects much of you there; he's just got these principles that will make your life go much more smoothly and pleasantly. And really, that's what it all boils down to: the promise of making your life more comfortable and pleasant.

I have an idea that there is a correlation between what people want in a church, and what they want out of life. It would make sense, wouldn't it? People who are drawn to a church that promises to be fun, convenient, easy, non-demanding, are probably people who are drawn to those same qualities in every area of life. It is their driving force, their heart's desire: a life that is pleasant, enjoyable, easy.

But what about you? You clearly haven't chosen to be a part of a church that is all about fun and ease. What do you hope for in life? Long for? And remember, James expects us to be honest

about it, at least with ourselves. As I look around our society it seems to me that what most people want in life is to be important. Now, what being important means is going to look different to different people and in different contexts. For some people, being important involves having money, lots of it. The big house, or multiple houses, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow; the person with the most toys at the end wins, that kind of importance. For other people being important means having power, and again, that's a matter of context. It might mean having the corner office with VP on the door, but it might just mean being in charge, needing to be right, or getting the last word in every argument.

Ministers, of course, can't admit that being important is important – it's not very humble you know – but what most of us privately long for is recognition. They want to be known beyond the doors of their local churches. They – we – want to be able to tell our friends about all of the pulpit nominating committees that come to hear us and try to lure us away to bigger and more prominent churches. We publish. We get doctorates. We blog about all our important thoughts and ideas. We try to squeeze ourselves into the limelight as often as possible. So, yes, we want to be important.

Well, maybe somewhere in there I've hit on what you truly long for in life, maybe not. The important thing is that you do it, you name it; that you take an honest look at your life and assess your hopes and desires. That's James' point this week. The honest naming of what we want most in life.

Now, that might not seem like what he is getting at when the heading of the section clearly says "two kinds of wisdom," but it is. When he asks that first question of us, 'who is wise among us,' that's really where he is headed. He's just taking the back door to get there. See, wisdom doesn't have anything to do with how smart you are, or how insightful you are into the ways of the world, or your understanding of why people do the things they do. People don't know you're wise because of the pithy or profound things you say, the sage advice you give. They'll know if you are wise or not by your actions. What James says is that your actions reveal, not what you think, or what you understand about the world or human nature, but they reveal what you want most in life. They reveal your heart, your deepest desires.

And according to James, there really are only two choices. We either want to be the center of the universe, or we want to be someone who was created in the image of God. Either the whole focus is on me – living the good life, the fun, cool life, being important, being right, winning – or the whole focus is on God. There're no other choices, only those two. Your heart's desire is you, or it's God.

It's kind of like the Emperor's New Clothes, isn't it? We can parade around with our holy words and religious fervor all we want and try to convince people of our spiritual finery, but the truth is obvious, isn't it? They can see it in the way we act when we're together. If my heart's desire in life is God, then I will be peaceable, gentle, merciful, kind. My words and actions will build up the community. But if my heart's desire in life is my own good, then I'll cause friction, I'll dominate, I'll work for my own comfort and ease, I'll be a self-promoter. Exactly like the disciples in the gospel lesson – tell us Jesus, which one of us is the greatest?

There was a moderately interesting story on the radio last week about the chaplain at the Atlanta airport who spends his days, not just having services in the chapel, but rescuing travelers whose fragile lives and nerves are about to come completely undone. He helps an anxious elderly woman get to her departure gate. He advocates for a stranded passenger with the heartless airline and gets him on the next flight out. He gives money to a family whose last dime was stolen on their vacation. He gives them hope and comfort. And if the opportunity arises, he tells them about the source of their hope and comfort.

As I said, I found the story only moderately interesting. What I found more intriguing were the responses to the story from listeners. Many of them wrote about how pleasantly surprised they were to hear a story about a minister, a Christian, who was just out being compassionate and caring, not cramming religion down throats or passing out tracts about hell. They expressed surprise that he wasn't out promoting some agenda or swaggering around 'acting religious.' Clearly they didn't understand that this was religious behavior, Christian behavior. Godly behavior. As one commentator put it, wisdom is demonstrating "actions and sentiments that correspond to the character of God."

This week James invites us to do basically the same thing that story on the radio did: play a short clip about our lives and see what effect we are having, what people are saying. Are we leaving people refreshed and encouraged in our wake, or all stirred up? At peace, or ready for a brawl? The answer will tell you what your heart's desire is. And remember, there are only two choices, you, or God.

I leave you with one final response to the story about the chaplain. One man wrote, "If faith without works is dead, then this man's faith must be truly alive. May we all love our neighbors as ourselves, and see everyone as a neighbor!"