

Alive: Spirit of Love: Loving Self

Romans 12:3-8, James 3:13-18, Proverbs 4:4-9

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Since the beginning, God has had a lofty vision for what God's people can be in the world. He tells Abraham way back in Genesis, "through you I'm going to bless all the nations." If we skip forward to the New Testament, Jesus and later Paul pick up on the potential of this community and use imagery of a healthy body.

Paul, in our first reading for today says in his letter to the Romans: *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.* The Word of God for the people of God.

Wow. Can you imagine that? being different, but connected? Living into your uniqueness while still being humble. Celebrating others' accomplishments while still be secure in your station? That sounds amazing. How do we create that kind of community? I think all of us, being as that we have bodies, have a sense of them in seasons of health and unhealth. We know what works, unfortunately mostly in hindsight, to make them healthy and what doesn't. Throughout the history of the church there have been lots of well-meaning approaches to making this body of Christ healthy. Fad diets, if you will. Here's a few of them you may be familiar with:

The first is follow the rules. That is, "the bible says it, I believe, that settles it." Even if I don't really think that is the way things are, I'll obey. The second way Christians have done it is "go along to get along." I'd say this is my preferred method throughout my life. It's

when you look for what the rest of the group is doing, then you do it too so that they like you and keep you around. The third is "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." That is that if you don't get in line, then you can leave so we can create a perfectly homogeneous body that believes the same things.

How many of you experienced the first type of community? Follow the rules? It is ripe for hypocrisy, isn't it? How many of you experienced the "go along to get along"? Where was the conviction there? Did anyone really believe anything? Finally, how many of you experienced the squeaky wheel church where the outliers just got chucked? Certainly, no church hurt there. Unfortunately, these approaches to building the type of church Jesus and Paul describe are more common than not. I think that the reason is because of what James talks about in his letter.

He says this, *"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness."*

He's sharing with us that there are two wisdoms. One of them, worldly wisdom, leads to the kinds of solutions Christians have been applying to this body-building work for years and years. James lays out the consequences: envy, ambition, boasting, disorder, and evil. But, he says, there is a different wisdom, a heavenly wisdom, and interestingly enough, it's not just a noun, but a name "Wisdom." This Wisdom leads to purity, peace, consideration, mercy, good fruit, impartiality, and sincerity." What I think God would say are signs of a healthy body.

So, we need this second kind of wisdom, or this Wisdom character. What does that get us? well, for that answer we need to jump all the way back to the book of proverbs in a section called "parental advice." It's in Proverbs 4:4-9.

*Listen, children, to a father's instruction,
and be attentive, that you may gain insight;
for I give you good precepts:
do not forsake my teaching.*

*When I was a son with my father,
tender, and my mother's favorite,
he taught me, and said to me,
'Let your heart hold fast my words;
keep my commandments, and live.
Get wisdom; get insight: do not forget, nor turn
away from the words of my mouth.
Do not forsake her, and she will keep you;
love her, and she will guard you.
The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,
and whatever else you get, get insight.
Prize her highly, and she will exalt you;
she will honor you if you embrace her.
She will place on your head a fair garland;
she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.'*

To bottom-line this passage: The author who is a father, speaking to his son, says, "the best advice I ever got from my dad for building a faithful life and community was, 'listen to God,' not me. If you do, then God/wisdom will protect you, honor you, and crown you."

Protect you, honor you, and crown you? What's that all about?

Protect – The very basic task of parents who have children is what? Protect them. Keep them safe. God's wisdom for how to create community is by creating one that is safe. Physically safe. Emotionally safe. Spiritually safe. When people feel safe in these ways, they can live into who God created them to be. They can use the gifts that God has given them. They can be the part of the body that we are looking for. So, it begs the question, in what ways are we creating a place that is safe in our community?

Honor – we don't really live in an honor society, so it is hard for us to understand what's going on with the upside of honor in a family system. But, generally speaking, when you are born into a society that is typically organized around honor, it was safe to say that your birth position in the family came with a role. Everyone knew the role, the role had a purpose, and the role was yours. You are situated. We live in one of the most disjointed, disorienting, disconnected times in human history. Very few people feel like they are situated. Or if they were, they have a real sense that they might not in the future. It's why we created Connect Path. It is why we have support groups. It's why Young Adult Ministry exists to create a place. In what ways in your life here at prince of peace and in your life as prince of peace in the world are you helping people feel situated? Like they have a place? If people don't have that feeling, if they don't have a

place to stand in our community, then they won't ever feel like they have the leverage they need to make an impact.

Crowned – Now, this passage was spoken to a son in a particular community of people that already had a sense of chosen-ness to it. This was a set-apart, claimed son, in a set-apart and claimed people. They were not wanderers. They were not nomads anymore. They were the people of God. Think of the Father in the Gospels throwing a ring on the son who comes come. When we listen to Wisdom, we can trust that **we are claimed**. How are we claiming people? Not in a colonizing way or domineering way, but how are we calling people brother and sister and friend? Do the people in our orbit feel that they are anything to us or we to them? As a community gathered around baptism, where we call people brother and sister, this must be core to who we are. People need to know that they are family because it signals to them that they are not alone. So, how are we claiming people?

I don't think that this wisdom is profound or hard to embody or understand. I understood it as a child. It is what I experienced when I was a kid going to Okoboji Lutheran Bible Camp every summer. I've always understood these to be the basic building blocks of camp. Interpersonal neurobiologists understand it to be the basic elements of attachment. Secure attachment: to your parents, to your group, and to your church is THE foundation that all relationships stand on. You get attachment when you are safe, situated, and claimed. Those are the conditions that make the body metaphors of Jesus and Paul a reality and more importantly—a possibility.

So, is that what we are doing? Are we using that heavenly wisdom? It is a question we have to consider, because until we are creating those conditions, none of the rest of what we do will be accessible to the people that want to be part of this community.

So, as we continue worship today and our shared lives together, consider this:

One: How are we claiming people? When we baptize kids or welcome new members or participants to a group, do they know they are part of our family?

Two: How are we situating people? Do people have a sense of where fit socially or physically in our church? Or is it every person for themselves?

Three: How are we making this place safe? Are people free from physical harm, spiritual harm, and social harm?

If we can lean into these three qualities, we will be the church Jesus and Paul envisioned.