

Sunday, September 19, 2021

Rev. Dr. Rodney Kennedy

“Gentle Wisdom”

James 3:13 – 4:3, 7 – 8

James tells us wisdom is born of gentleness. This raises red flags. I am not convinced that we are gentle, and whether we are wise faces a mountain of contradictory evidence, but I want us to be wise and gentle people. Let us learn all we can about gentleness and wisdom.

The most destructive aspect of the American state of mind is that we have developed a non-repentant state of mind. Isaiah must have seen us coming across the ages: “Oh, rebellious children, says the Lord, who carry out a plan, but not mine; who make an alliance, but against my will, adding sin to sin.” Many Americans revel in being anti-government, anti-vaxxers, anti-maskers, anti-climate change. Often, we say, the evidence doesn’t matter. Who cares about evidence and facts in the post-truth age? In the 1960’s people said, “I don’t care if smoking causes cancer, I am going to smoke till I die.” “Don’t tell me to “buckle up for safety.” “How dare you interfere with my right to burn coal or interfere with my business’s right to pollute?” Such ideas would have been laughed out of the room until a few decades ago, but now it passes for common sense even though it threatens to cut off at the knees actions to prevent the destruction of human life. What if we are merely anti-repenters?

Since Americans have this built-in desire to return to a state of innocence, you can define us as a people desiring to return to Eden. The irony of a people who are supposed to be going forward, following Jesus, and we are inebriated with the desire to go back. Back we cry, “Back to the slave pots of Egypt.” “Back to the good old days.” “Back to the 1950’s.” Jeremiah decried: “In the **stubbornness** of their evil will, they looked backward rather than forward.” Most of all, there’s the deep desire to go back to the Garden of Eden. The train going back to Eden stalled out and stopped in the ancient ruins of a disgraced city. That’s the place where God confused the language of all the earth and gave it forever the place name of Babel.

And as I listen to the way we have turned our nation into a Kingdom of Babel, I am convinced that we are not in the mood for gentleness or wisdom. Babel is social media, twenty-four-hour talk radio, television “opinionators,” network news, television evangelists, politicians, and a plethora of others. Our long stay in the land of Babel has been dangerously self-deceptive because it has convinced us that we are right; the others are wrong. We are righteous; the others are wicked. We are the way we have always been the others are pushy and demanding and are destroying our culture. This is the true nature of an unrepentant cultural mindset: “Who do you think you are to tell me to repent?”

In post-modern, post-truth Babel, we have freedom from truth. Untethered from truth, we make it up as we go. We have fallen for the original temptation. I believe that the original post-truth takes place in the rhetoric of the talking snake. “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” Suspicion and mistrust are implanted in Eve’s mind. Then the BIG lie: “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” The talking snake was a slick rhetorician using the trope of paralipsis: “I’m not saying God is a liar, I’m just saying” (Jennifer Mercieca).

Eve fell for the BIG lie. After all, Eve knew the truth. She repeats the truth to the snake: “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” When you know the truth but refuse the truth, you are in ultimate danger. Eve gets the offer of ultimate freedom, a licentious freedom of thought outside of the commands of God. She rejects the truth for the promise of not being bound by the possibility of death.

Almost everyone feels the world is spiraling out of control. We are no longer in charge and feel threatened by every movement. People think that everything they have been taught, everything they held dear, is being ripped from their hearts and they are not going to take it anymore. This is the spirit of the unrepentant. Everything wrong is somebody’s else’s fault. Americans have become the world’s most expert critics and with our “dipped in vitriol” opinions, we are not bashful about telling others how the cow eats the cabbage. What we believe is real; what others believe is conspiracy. Consider one of the most universal symbols in the world, the red cursive script that says, *Cocola*. In the South the symbol is so embedded, that we call every soft drink a Coke. Coke’s slogan was once the “real thing”—which is odd given that it is an artificially

colored, artificially flavored, artificially carbonated non-nutritional beverage partaking of absolutely nothing real. But this does not matter. The symbol has the power to become the thing it symbolizes and logic neither creates the effect, not negates it. We are a culture of symbols, flags, colors, signs, and logic plays no role.

Like a hurricane sweeping across the land, the anger, fear, confusion, suspicion, mistrust pile up at the front steps of our mind each morning. If we hear something from our side of the great divide, we swallow it whole. If we read something that disagrees with our side, we fact check it again and again. We are not a gentle, well-mannered people. Perhaps we have never been such.

At some level, we all know that the evidence of Scripture – from the Law to the Gospel, from the prophets to Paul – goes against our violent, angry, unrepentant age. And here are the words of James in today's New Testament epistle lesson: "Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with **gentleness** born of wisdom." Scripture is clear: The more wisdom we acquire, the gentler we will become with others.

As I struggled with this text, I was struck by James connecting gentleness with wisdom. There's a book that I read a few years ago that really helped me. Paul Griffiths, in *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar*, talks about curiosity. As a scholar, I tend to think curiosity is a commendable virtue. I even encourage my students to develop curiosity. I didn't know until Griffiths pointed it out, but curiosity was once thought to be a vice. Curiosity was considered a form of love, by which the knower could have superior knowledge, more knowledge than others. They were curious for new knowledge so they could have control over that which they knew and power over those lacking such knowledge. Griffiths defines curiosity as "appetite for the ownership of new knowledge." Curiosity can become a form of intellectual greed and implants in the mind an insatiable desire to always want more knowledge.

Griffiths says that we should develop studiousness because it is a loving participation in knowledge as a gift to be shared. Instead of knowledge being a possession to maintain control and appear smarter than others, in a studious person knowledge is a participatory intimacy. This intimacy is "drive by wonder and riven by lament." What we do with our knowledge is make it available to others because it doesn't belong to us. We are sharing the knowledge that belongs only to God and it was God's before we had a use for it or even knew

anything about it. True knowledge is knowing that God loved us before we loved God.

A studious person has wisdom and shares it with others. And this is done with a gentle spirit. Instead of arguments to be won, there is a sharing of Christ and the gospel. Instead of needing to be right, there is a willingness to give away that we have to others. Rather than being offended when others disagree, there is humility in knowing that all knowledge comes from God and returns to God and belongs to God.

I desire to be a studious person not captured by a greed for unique knowing. I ask God to help me become a gentler person and for you to hold me accountable. God has given us all we need not to be possessed with the vice of curiosity, the need to lord it over others, and tell others what they can and can't do. Even if we are possessed by anger, resentment, fear, through confession and repentance we can be forgiven. Forgiveness, however, requires repentance. A non-repentant culture that sees no need for repentance is between a rock and a hard place.

Let us heed the clear call to change: "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."