

**FOLLY OR WISDOM: THE WORLD'S WAYS, OR THE REIGN OF GOD
TWO ARCHTYPES: GOD OR THE DEVIL / CHRIST OR THE ANTICHRIST**

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 22, 2024

Peter and Andrew and Matthew and John and all the rest of those first followers of Jesus were arguing on the road about which one of them was the greatest. Greatness or mediocrity; fighting to get ahead or settling for second place. There is, embedded deep within the human psyche, two opposing driving forces vying for ascendancy. I suppose that you could say it this way, that there are two opposing archetypes at work if we were to use Carl Jung's constructs. But what does greatness really look like? You see, there are two kinds of understanding; two kinds of wisdom planted deep within the soil of our being. One seed comes from our lower baser human nature, the other seed carries the DNA of the divine.

All of humanity has been placed here on this earth by God to be stewards of all creation; called by God to take what we have discerned to be God's will and purpose and values, and do what we are able, to shepherd and nurture every animal, plant, mineral, and our human brothers and sisters here on earth; every being that is simply trying to survive and maybe even thrive on our shared earthly home.

But it is not unusual for us, and for humanity, to yield to the seed of our baser nature and head down a darker path that God did not design for us. Jesus said it this way: "for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it." Many choose to walk through the wide gate. Those twelve disciples did as well at times.

We know this when we look around the world and see all the turmoil and hatred and fear; as we look at the political and religious and ethnic battles

constantly raging on a global scale. We know that the gate humanity often decides to walk through, is the one antithetical to God's ways and purposes and values. And we often have a hard time discerning God's ways.

The prophet Isaiah spoke for God when he said: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Jesus said something similar in his teaching when he said: "you have heard that it is said . . . but I say to you."

The author of James this morning approaches this same idea by speaking of wisdom and understanding. He asks the question: "Who is wise and understanding of God's ways?" He is saying that there is human wisdom and understanding, and then there is God's. And James lifts up God's understanding and wisdom far above that of humanity.

The understanding of God and the wisdom of God is sometimes a deep mystery beyond what we can comprehend. We catch glimpses of God's understanding in scripture and in many sacred texts, and it is often new, and sometimes challenging to our way of understanding. God's ways may not align with what we have learned and been taught from our families and communities and society.

James is saying here that those who continue to gain further understanding of God's ways will continue to see ultimate reality, and their place in that reality, in bigger and bigger ways, and this will increase their wisdom. Those who increase in wisdom will increase in humility and will be less prone to excessive self-importance and selfish ambition.

Jesus' disciples were at times much like those spoken of by James who struggled with insecurity and selfish ambition. We see it in today's gospel.

Jesus, the wise sage who deeply and intimately understood God's ways, spent his ministry on earth working at molding and shaping his disciples into God's ways. He would speak to them first of the world's way of understanding, and then give them a hint into God's ways, into God's understanding.

On that long ago day the twelve disciples were walking along on their way to Capernaum, talking with one another while Jesus kept pace some distance ahead of them, seemingly lost in his own thoughts. They were debating and arguing over which one of them was the most important, which one was Jesus' favorite. As they debated, it turns out Jesus was NOT lost in his own thoughts. He was listening closely to their words and how they wrestled with their human aspirations and importance. As Jesus walked and listened, he talked with his heavenly Father.

They finally arrived at Capernaum and settled into the house. They probably got comfortable, maybe snacking on a few figs. They were relaxed, and in that intimate moment their guard was down. Jesus seized the moment to mold these men. He raised a question: "What were you discussing out on the road." I can picture the faces of the twelve immediately getting flush. They all looked like the cat who swallowed the canary. It was as if all the air had suddenly been sucked from the room. They had been caught in their pettiness. No one spoke. They were embarrassed and wished they could become invisible.

And yet Jesus looked at them in their embarrassing human frailty with deep love. Then he called his little chicks together and addressed his own question: "Whoever wants to be first - - must take last place and be the servant of everyone else." In an interesting side note, this incident is also recorded in Matthew and Luke's gospels, but they leave out this statement;

whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else.

To drive home this lesson Jesus called a child over to them. Then Luke's gospel records what Jesus said next: "Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great." True greatness, Jesus said, is to be found in obscurity and insignificance; in the last, not the first, the least, not the most. This is the kind of paradoxical wisdom Jesus often employed to reveal God's ways. Greatness is found in humble simple places. Wisdom that comes from above tells us that humanity's ways are not God's ways.

Let me come at these two ways of looking at reality from another angle by utilizing some of the imagery employed by the imminent psychiatrist Carl Jung. He identified a series of archetypes, symbols and patterns that universally apply to all of humanity. There are two archetypes that relate to either God's understanding and wisdom, or that of humanity. Using Christian imagery and metaphor, we could say that the two primary active archetypes at loose in the world, are that of the Christ, and the antichrist. Christ is obviously seen in the life and teaching of Jesus the Christ. But Christ is also seen in all knowledge and understanding and wisdom that ultimately come from God. Christ's antithesis, the antichrist is seen in all baser human ways of life and knowledge and understanding and wisdom that are contrary to God.

Both the Christ and the Antichrist symbols have been active globally since the beginning of time. The Book of 1 John says: "As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come." The Hebrew and Christian scriptures speak of both. The spirit of the Antichrist, which is also called the Beast in Revelation was understood by the early church to refer

to the oppressive Roman Empire. And there were times when the Catholic Church was corrupt and power hungry, and the devout faithful saw the Antichrist at work in the religious system.

Both archetypes continue to be active in our world today; in our families and communities churches and political systems. Both can be seen clearly, especially now in this run up to a general election with all its political polarization and rancor. Christ can be seen in those leaders who are concerned with serving others, especially the needs of the poor. The antichrist is seen in leaders who are self-serving, and are ultimately concerned with elevating their own self-interests. Christ is seen where the light of truth and justice shines brightly on behalf of all God's children. Antichrist is seen wherever there is manipulation and half-truths and lies. Christ is seen where those who struggle are raised up. Antichrist is seen where those with little means are pushed down. Christ is known where genuine divine love is seen, whereas the antichrist thrives on fear.

The spirit of Christ and Antichrist reside in all of us to varying degrees. Let us follow the spirit of Christ. Here again the prayer in today's Collect: "Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."