

Show not Tell

This semester I'm teaching a course on writing, and this is one of the basic principles we use to guide our work. Don't tell me **about** the person in your story, don't spend a lot of time describing their hair or their clothes. **Show** me that person – what they do, how they talk, how they react to situations and other people. Don't use adjectives: tall, short, lazy, proud; use verbs – stride or tiptoe, lounge or yawn or sneer. That's when I can see your character as a complete person. This principle works in stories because that's how it works in real life: we get to know people based on how they treat us or those around us, not by what they look like or how they talk about themselves. Someone may SAY, I'm a good person, I'm a Christian, but if their actions don't fit their words, then we don't believe them. I'm not someone who has a whole lot in common with Pope Francis, in fact we disagree profoundly on a number of aspects of faith. But I can also recognize when I think he's listening to the Spirit and speaking with true wisdom. This is what he said about the current refugee crisis in Europe:

"I appeal to the parishes, the religious communities, the monasteries and sanctuaries of all Europe to ... take in one family of refugees,"

Every parish, every religious community, every monastery, every sanctuary of Europe, take in one family.”

Francis said taking in migrant families was a “concrete gesture” to prepare for the extraordinary Holy Year on the theme of mercy which is due to begin on Dec. 8. (Reuters, Sept 6 2016, published in Fortune magazine)

Many of you are already aware that members of this church are likewise involved in preparing to do likewise here in Ladysmith, as we did a few years ago with a Syrian family. I want to pick up one particular phrase that the Pope used – “concrete gesture” –in order to bring us to the passage from James that was read earlier. The letter from James, unlike other New Testament books, places strong emphasis on the principle that faith itself means little if it is not demonstrated by the kind of life the faithful person is leading. Claiming to be led by God, to have wisdom and understanding? James says Prove it! In verse 13. True wisdom, the kind that comes from Heaven, produces a harvest of good deeds, in verse 17. No good deeds? All talk and no action, or worse, actions that betray selfish and jealous motivations instead? You’re not listening to the Spirit, and you’re pushing people away from the Good News. There’s a popular saying – live your life as though it were the only Gospel your neighbours will ever read. Those are big

shoes to fill, and so often, so many of us fail to do us. We've heard many times – well, if that's what Christians are like then I want nothing to do with Christianity, and we acknowledge with heavy hearts how often that judgment is anchored in unpleasant reality – from the residential schools tragedy here to razor wire fences cutting off refugees from the road to safety. Christian churches have preached segregation and apartheid, turned a blind eye to violence against minorities, women, children. But that's not true Christianity, we cry in response. We find ourselves with James – by their fruit we shall know them, by the harvest of good deeds they produce. By the way, I want to underline how much I like that word “harvest”: it's not a scattering of good deeds here and there, now and then, but a full supply, ample and sustaining. But if we get nothing but fine words and empty fields, then we agree with James that the wisdom of the Lord is not at work there.

We've been talking about the actions of churches and even governments which call themselves Christian, and how they may act or fail to act to live up to that name. But what about ourselves, in our small daily lives? How too shall we live out the Gospel in front of our communities? Sometimes it is big gestures – the Food Bank or the refugee sponsorship. Sometimes it's little things – Ron's campaign for random acts of kindness. But always, always, it's the kind of person

we show ourselves to be, not the kind of person we say we are, that shines the Spirit's light.

Living by the wisdom from Heaven, to use James' term, is shown primarily by the way we relate to people. When James says in verse 16 that a lack of wisdom causes "disorder," he is talking primarily about horizontal disorder—or problems with people. Every day of your life, whether you like it or not, you encounter people. And people are notorious for being hard to get along with. That's why we must learn how to relate wisely to others. In [James 3:18](#) we read, "Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness." James is making the point that what you sow in your relationships is what you will reap! And in every relationship we have, we are either sowing seeds of disorder, seeds of anger, seeds of mistrust, seeds of conflict—or seeds of peace that will result in a harvest of goodness.

But how do you plant seeds of peace in your relationships? What does it really mean to show true wisdom at home? In the office? At work? At school? Or in your neighborhood? How can you know true wisdom when you see it? James answers that question in verses 3:17-18.

This is a kind of personal exam by which we can see how wise or otherwise we really are in all our relationships. James lists a number of distinguishing marks of a

wise person. Let's see what they are.

First, the wise person is pure. James says in verse 17: "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure." The word "first" means "first not only in order but also in importance." So we'll spend a little longer on this first mark.

The word "pure" literally means "without pollution or freedom from defilement."

The truly wise person is a person of great integrity. If you are wise, you will not compromise your integrity. All relationships are built on trust, and when you lie to people or let them down, and don't mend that breach, you will eventually lose their trust. It is very difficult to rebuild a damaged relationship,

Second, the wise person is peace-loving. James says, "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is. . . peace-loving." To be peace-loving means more than simply not fighting back when wronged. This word carries with it the idea of one who is actively pursuing peace. This is the type of person who, when he or she sees division and argument, always works to remove them. This person is always seeking answers and solutions to the many divisions and quarrels around him.

Such a person wants to patch up quarrels rather than create them. Of all the marks of true wisdom, James hits this one the hardest. He even reiterates this in verse 18: "Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of goodness." Those who are peacemakers will reap a reward from God. In the Sermon on the Mount

Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers. . . .” And that’s the point here. If you are a peacemaker, your life will be blessed by God.

Thirdly the wise person is gentle. James says, “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is. . . gentle.” This word “gentle” does not mean being wishy-washy. But it carries with it the idea of open-mindedness, respecting the opinion of others. It means being sincerely open to suggestions. Being someone who is teachable. Not obstinate or stubborn. This person is open to reason. One who allows discussion. Wise people can learn from anyone. They are not closed and defensive, but they are open and teachable. When you come up against a person who disagrees with you, do you show them an open and teachable spirit? The wise person knows how to sincerely say, “I’ll think about that, I really will.” Often, we are so sensitive to criticism, and to suggestions, that it is very difficult for us to learn anything. But wisdom is reasonable. It is willing to yield. [Proverbs 12:15](#) says, “A fool thinks that he needs no advice; but a wise man listens to others.”

Fourth, the wise person is compassionate. James says, “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is. . . full of compassionate and good deeds.” To be “full of mercy and good fruit” does not mean that you just sit around feeling sorry for others. It is the kind of compassion toward the needy which shows itself in tangible action on their behalf. We come back to Pope Francis’ concrete gesture.

Lastly, the wise person is impartial and sincere. James says, "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is. . . free from prejudice and hypocrisy." It's the idea of being reasonable, but also consistent. These words suggest a person with fixed principles. He or she will never violate those principles, regardless of the situation. The Greek word for "hypocrisy" comes from a term that was used to describe a Greek actor that played two parts. In the Greek theater an actor would sometimes play many parts in the same play. At one time he would come out with a happy mask, hold it in front of his face and say his lines. Then he would run off to the side, grab a sad mask and deliver his sad lines. He would play two parts. He was called a hupocrites, which simply means that he wore a mask. He pretended; he faked it; he was not genuine; he was not sincere.

It's tough to be completely genuine all the time. Many of us have learned that survival is easier when we hide our true selves from others. We feel safer when we can put up a mask that says, "I'm tough," or, "I'm in control," or, "I'm okay," or, "I'm holy." The trouble is that as we continue to hide behind our masks we become lonely and isolated because we have created a distance between ourselves and those whose love and acceptance we really need.

Some of us need to come out of hiding today. We need to put down our mask and risk relating to others openly and honestly—without hypocrisy. I'll be the first to admit that's not easy—in fact it can be very scary. But James tells us that it is the way of wisdom. It's the only really satisfying way to live. It's the only path to authentic, meaningful relationships in life. Christianity isn't something we say, it's something we do – we need to be genuine and loving in our relationships and in our actions, even when that means putting ourselves at risk emotionally, or even financially or physically. How will they know we are Christians – not by our clothes, or even by our music or where we go on Sundays. They will know by our love, by our cooperation and helpfulness, by our active compassion.