September 20, 2009 Year B
Proverbs 31; Psalm 1; James 3; Mark 9
Fellowship of Hope Mennonite Church

Tomorrow, September 21, is World Peace Day. On Facebook, I'm a fan of Peace One Day (*who wouldn't be?!)* and daily I see posts from around the globe as people are participating in and planning events to mark World Peace Day. It's exciting to see people engaged, putting peace in action in so many places. Today, across Mennonite Church USA, is Peace Sunday. I confess, my response to Peace Sunday in the Mennonite Church tends to be arrogant and smug. *We* know how to do peace. Afterall, don't people come into *our* doors because of our peace position, our pacifism? And then there's our relief sales—a perfect example of peace in action. We Mennonites are good at peace. Peace is our strength. *Every* Sunday in the Mennonite Church is peace Sunday, no?

These things may be true about us, as a denomination and as local church communities. We're particularly good at non-violence, at not participating in war. Or are we? After spending time with the James Text this week, my arrogance and smugness disappears. There's no room for it. This will not be a sermon raging against and confessing our participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the countless other wars around our planet. There are times to do that...but not today. This will not be a sermon of protest against empire and separating ourselves from its violence. There is a time for that sermon... but today, on this peace Sunday, James is talking about ending wars—not out there, not wars between countries—but in here, within ourselves. Within our church communities. World peace begins with our own peace.

Let's turn to James. The lectionary reading begins, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" Wise as in *sophia*. Wisdom as in Psalm 1, a wise person being one who

meditates, day and night, on *torah,* on God's Word written into creation. God's Word spoken by the prophets. God's Word written onto scrolls. The wise person described by the psalmist is rooted in God, roots nourished in streams of living water. Rooted in God, the person of wisdom is grounded, stands sure, secure, eyes fixed on God. Unlike the unwise one who is like chaff, without weight, blown and tossed about by the slightest wind.

"Who is wise and understanding?" James asks. Who is wise and learned? This is the question James poses in verse 13, the question he proceeds to answer. If you are wise and understanding, he answers, "show by your good life that your works are done with humility born of wisdom." Note that this good life is born of wisdom...born of God's Word, born of the Word-Made-Flesh—not in understanding or knowledge or intellect—but in being rooted in God.

But what is this good life? *Good* can be such a generic word in English. In this context, we're likely to think of *good* referring to morality, to right or wrong behavior, to obeying God's laws. This Greek adjective, *kalos,* is nearly always translated into English as *good*. But *kalos* is more than *good* the way we use the word in English. It also means good as in beautiful—the beauty of the way something looks, the beauty of the way something is used and functions, beauty as morality and an ethic. In Genesis 1, as each day ends, God looks over what was created and says, "It is good." It is *kalos*. It is beautiful.

James is talking about the beauty of our living, that at the end of each day, we look back at the day and say, It is good. That we look at the living of our lives and say, It is beautiful. Not pretty, as in beauty pageants, attraction that calls attention to the self. But beauty as in great works of art that endure. Beauty as in the perfection of nature. Beauty that captures our gaze... and points us toward something greater than ourselves, points to God,

God's Wisdom, God's Grace and Love. This is the kind of beautiful living that James is talking about.

But there are things that get in the way of beautiful living. In v 14 James lists these things. We're human. We know this list all too well! If "humility born in wisdom" paints a life of beauty, then anything that is *not* humility or *not* born of wisdom is *not* beautiful. What gets in the way of good living is holding envy and ambition, keeping rivalry and competition in our hearts, wanting to be special, the best.

What we hold in our hearts is either waging war or making peace.

The Mark Text speaks to this ambition, this competition in our relationships that James is describing. Jesus and his disciples are on the road and he's teaching them, telling them about how he will be given over to humanity, killed, and after 3 days, he will again stand. When they arrive at their destination, Jesus asks them, So what is it you've been arguing about? They won't say, but Jesus knows. They've been arguing about who is the greatest, who is the most important, who is the most faithful, who best understands, who is the best disciple, the most obedient, the best follower. They're holding personal ambition, personal needs in their hearts. They're holding a need to excel, to compete with each other, to set themselves apart and rank each other.... even in their discipleship.

These 12, these chosen disciples, the ones that are receiving Jesus' secret teachings of the kingdom... they are too occupied with what *they* think is important to listen to Jesus! Jesus knows and sees their hearts, their humanity. Jesus loves them. He keeps teaching, taking a little child and holding her. Holding this child in their midst not because children were adorable and the center of attention as we experience them. Children in that day were essentially property, no rights, given little attention or consideration. On the social ladder,

they were the lowest, the least. And Jesus says, Be the least. Do your works with humility born of wisdom. Be willing to be the last, the least. Yield your power and passions to the children among you, receiving the least...the last...receiving Christ. Let go of your need to excel and compete with each other, to be better than the other. A beautiful life doesn't hold competition. A good life is never measured by who is the most or the best.

The need to be the greatest is a human need. We want to be special, to matter, to be loved, whether individually or collectively. The voice of our ego says that to be special, we *must* compete, we must be better, be more. But James, rooted in the Wisdom of God, listening to the Word of God, says something else. We are already special. We are already children of God, loved by God. The voice of the ego may never go completely silent, but the voice we listen to, the voice that grows stronger within us, is the voice of our Christ, the voice of Wisdom. In v 17 James describes the characteristics of this voice, "But the wisdom from above is first holy, then peaceable, yielding, easily ready to give, full of lovingkindness and morally good fruits, without a trace of indecision or pretense."

Imagine the beauty of living with this Wisdom in our hearts. These are the secrets to the Kingdom of God that Jesus taught to his disciples as they journeyed through Galilee. That James and the apostles continued to teach after Jesus ascended. James is painting a picture of what life in Christ looks like, describing its beauty.

But the lives of the 12 tribes fell short, as we, invariably, fall short. James moves from describing the beauty that is available to us to the reality of how we too often live. His writing remains vivid and powerful. The English translations tend to tone down the language, but James' question is demanding, v 1 of chapter 4, "Those wars and fights among you, where do they come from?" Those *wars* and *fights* among you, where do they come

from? He isn't talking about nations at war. Or violence in the city. Or systems of injustice. No, he's declaring their lack of harmony, their selfish ambition, their competition as war. James is characterizing their unwillingness to live in the Kingdom of God, their unwillingness to live in humility and to yield to each other, to let go of personal needs... as war, as armed conflict. And it is here, it is this declaration that ends all my smug arrogance, all my assumptions that I, as a Mennonite, somehow know how to do peace better than other denominations.

James continues by answering his question with another question, "They come from your self-indulgences that are at war within you, don't they? You want something and don't have it; so you kill. And you are zealous about something but aren't able to fulfill it; so you engage in fights and make war."

James asks us to take our eyes, at least for a few minutes this morning, from the wars and violence around the planet and look at the war that is waging within our hearts. This is not an easy...or pretty thing to do. But he demands that we tell the truth about ourselves, about our humanity, about what we hold in our hearts... and about the effects our actions have on each other. He knows that the truth will make us free...the truth is our access to liberation, to salvation. Unless we hold peace in our hearts, we'll be engaged in war with each other. Until we come near to God and yield to God's Love, we will fight with each other. Unless Wisdom pervades our hearts, our imagination, our being... we will be *un*able to live lives of beauty.

On this Peace Sunday, we're not first asking for guns to stop firing out there, we're first being asked to look within our hearts. To bring peace to our hearts. To our very beings.

On this Peace Sunday we let go of the things we've been holding that aren't holy; that aren't humble; that aren't born in Wisdom.

This is Good News. *We* can make a difference. We can be a new creation, giving birth to world peace. Nations are at war because individuals hold violence in their hearts and kill each other in words and deeds. When hearts and lives are beautiful, there is peace. World peace begins with us... begins when our hearts... and beings... when our lives are at peace... when we see their beauty. World peace begins with us delighting...day and night delighting in God's Torah. On this Peace Sunday, we begin a new creation by turning to our roots, watered by Living Water, nourished by Living Bread. On this Peace Sunday we willingly assume the social status of children, the last, the least...yielding our personal power and desires and longings to the Love of God. We understand that coming near to God, that dwelling in the heart of God, is the greatest thing. And tomorrow, on World Peace Day, and the next day...and the next... we will dwell in the Beauty of God's Presence. We will bloom in God's Love, in the Light of Christ. Our good lives joining the lives of God's people everywhere in a garden, in full bloom, its Beauty pointing to God, our Creator, our Liberator, our Breath.