

FROM THE PULPIT OF FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

SERMON: “The Root of Our Conflicts”

Oct. 4, 2009

PRAYER: O God of abundant grace, you withhold nothing good from those who ask in faith for that which you promise. Give to us open hearts and teachable minds, that, in a deeply divided world, where our desires set us in conflict with others, we may hear your word of grace that leads to a harvest of righteousness for those who seek the peace which comes from you; through Christ our Lord. Amen

SCRIPTURE LESSON: James 3:13-4:8

The Letter of James has never been the most popular book in the Bible, but it is certainly one of the most direct and down-to-earth. James lacks the lofty imagery of the Gospel of John and the profound theology of the letters of Paul, but it addresses head-on conflicts that continue to rage in the church and in the world. And so, on this World Communion Sunday, in a time of deepening divisions and escalating conflict, the Letter of James has a challenging and vitally important word to speak to us.

One of things that concerns me a great deal these days is the increasing level of anger throughout our society. If we learn anything from history, it is that anger rooted in anxiety can be as explosive as dynamite, especially when that anger is stoked for partisan advantage by both “sides of the aisle.” (When assault rifles are freely brought to political rallies, I fear that it may not be long before someone gets killed.)

In a time of deep and deepening divisions that threaten the fabric of our national life, James has a distinctive word to speak that addresses the root of our conflicts. “Where do the conflicts and disputes among you come from?” he asks. His answer is one we may not like.

James insists that ultimately our conflicts are rooted in our own sinful desires—our cravings, our envy of others, our selfish ambitions. The problem, he says, is not with others. It is with ourselves. “We have met the enemy, and he is us.” (Pogo) Our problem is that our desires are disordered. We love the wrong things. We set our hearts on things that do not and cannot fulfill our deepest needs.

In blunt, direct language James sets before us two very different ways of ordering life. One he calls the “**wisdom from above**,” which is rooted in God and leads to peace. The other he calls “**earthly wisdom**” rooted in our selfish desires that lead to conflict.

The “**wisdom from above**,” the wisdom that is rooted in the gracious generosity of God, he says, is “**first pure, then peaceable, it is gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.**” In our contentious society almost nothing is in shorter supply these days than what James calls the “**wisdom from above.**”

But it wasn’t always that way, as some of you are old enough to remember. On the day World War II ended a variety show entitled “Command Performance” was shown to the troops around the world. It featured ones like Frank Sinatra, Jimmy Durante, Dinah Shore, and Cary Grant. “The most striking feature of the show,” writes David Brooks, “was its tone of self-effacement and humility. The allies had, on that very day, completed one of the noblest military victories in the history of humanity.” And yet, he says, there was no proud, triumphant chest-beating. “All anybody can do is thank God its over,” said Bing Crosby, the show’s host. “Today our deep down feeling is one of **humility.**”¹

¹ David Brooks, “High-Five Nation,” *New York Times*, Sept. 15, 2009

But over the ensuing decades that sense of humility got lost—along with almost everything else that is **“pure and peaceable and gentle... free of prejudice and hypocrisy”** (TEV). The WE generation gave way to the ME generation. The “Greatest Generation” gave way to the “Whatever Generation.” A sustaining sense of community was replaced by what sociologists call “expressive individualism.” And any semblance of modesty or humility was overwhelmed by an orgy of self-promotion. Recently Peggy Noonan wrote of politicians who lack any “due sense of inadequacy.” The same could be said for almost anyone in the media spotlight these days. A lack of a “due sense of inadequacy.”

Across virtually the whole spectrum of our society the **“wisdom from above... without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy,”** has given way to the **“earthly wisdom”** which James says is rooted in **“envy and selfish ambition”** and leads to **“disorder and wickedness of every kind.”** Dave Letterman merely being the latest example.

But lest we think that all this applies to someone else and not us, we need to realize that our whole society is organized in terms of what James calls **“earthly wisdom.”** **“Earthly wisdom”** is simply “the way things are.” It is the way we are taught to think and act from the time we are old enough to watch our first commercial on TV.

At the heart of **“earthly wisdom”** is the belief that we live in a finite world of limited resources in which if **I** have more, **you** have less, and if **you** have more, **I** have less. That is what is sometimes called a **“0 sum game.”** A **“0 sum game”** is like a see-saw. If some are up, others are down. If some have more, others have less.

But if that is “the way it is,” then **competition** is the name of the game. You got to get what is yours before someone else does. **“Earthly wisdom”** is based on the **assumption of scarcity** and is **fueled by envy**, and the result, says James, is all manner of destructive competition. **“You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. You covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.”**

James is never subtle. He is not into “nuance.” If he appears to overstate his case, it is for the sake of telling the truth, and telling it in a way that just might get a hearing from ones who are deafened by the clamor of our consumerist culture. In order to open the eyes of those who have blinded by the glare of incessant commercials, James has to draw his message with big bold brush strokes. Nuance won’t do.

When all is said and done, what the wisdom of the world seeks to get you and me to buy into is the great lie that **who we are** and **what we are worth** are best measured by what we **have**. The more we have, the more we are. The less we have, the less we are.

That feeling of diminishment, of being less because we have less, threatens rich and poor alike. We are all tempted to think that if only we **had** more, we would **give more** and **love more** and **care more** and **be more**. But it never works that way, at least not for long. Like drinking salt-water to quench a thirst, every time we try to fill the emptiness within by some new thing, some new toy, some new accomplishment, we are left with an even emptier feeling. Every earthly desire that is satisfied still leaves us desiring still more. None of the things we possess, none of the pleasures we enjoy, can fulfill our deepest desire...a desire for communion with the living God, that issues forth in love for the neighbor. That is the way our Creator has made us. St. Augustine was right when he prayed, **“O Lord, thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”** That may be the most profound wisdom of all.

The wisdom of the world says that the more you have the more you are. And the only way you will have more is through competition with others for the limited resources of the world. But where does that way of wisdom lead? What kind of persons does it create? What kind of life does it nurture? You know as well as I do. It is obvious all around us.

James says that it leads **“to bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.”** It leads **“to disorder and wickedness of every kind.”** As I said, James is never subtle. He insists that our desire for more, and our envy of others who have more, lead to all manner of disputes and conflicts, even to murder and war. On the large scale of history it is hard to disagree with him. What war in history did not come from an explosive mixture of envy and greed and lust for power? And on a smaller scale, watch children on a playground, and ask yourself how long will it be before pushing and shoving to get a harmless little toy will lead to more deadly conflicts over sneakers or turf or respect?

James paints a sharp contrast between two forms of wisdom, two ways of ordering life—by the earthly wisdom based on scarcity that leads to conflict, or the wisdom from God, that over time shapes a life that is **“pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits.”**

The wisdom that comes from God is based, not on the assumption of scarcity, but on the abundance of God, “from whom comes every good and perfect gift.” Biblical faith knows and trusts a gracious Giver who provides all that we need to live as glad and grateful people. The God who created the heavens and earth and all that is in them is a God of awesome abundance, who gives grace upon grace to those who ask and seek in prayer.

What it all comes down at its most basic level is whether you or I really believe that the God we worship and serve is truly able to supply that which we most truly need. Can the providence of God be trusted? The Apostle Paul ends his lovely letter to the church at Philippi by encouraging them to, **“have no anxiety about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God and the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus... My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”**

But do you really believe that? Do I? Do we believe it enough to entrust our whole lives to the abundance of God’s grace in Jesus Christ? That’s why James is not content merely with offering us some good advice for living wisely. He sets before us a decisive choice and demands a decision. **“Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?”** Do you not realize that you cannot buy into both the world’s values and God’s wisdom at the same time? You can’t have it both ways. **“No one can serve two masters,”** says Jesus in language every bit as blunt as that of his brother James. **“Either he will love the one and hate the other or he will hate the one and love the other. You cannot serve God and mammon,”** riches, the things of this world. There can only be one organizing center of reality in your life. So who or what will it be? That question runs throughout scripture.

When all is said and done, James is not after a polite nod of our heads in agreement. He is after our **conversion**, a turning from one center of life to another. So like many an evangelist ever since, James issues an altar call.

“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands...and purify your hearts, you who are double-minded,” ...
you who find yourself torn between two basic allegiances.

That's all of us, isn't it? The Letter of James is not addressed to godless materialists *outside* the church. It is addressed to you and me. We are the ones torn between two ways of wisdom, two organizing principles for our lives--the earthly wisdom based on scarcity that leads to conflict, or the spiritual wisdom from God that leads to peace. Sooner or later, one way or another, a choice must be made...with huge consequences.

The wisdom from above points us to a way of life that is rooted in the abundance of God who in prayer gives more grace than we can ask or imagine. It invites us into a life of communion with the Lord whose grace is so rich and full that the world's desires no longer consume us.

But to walk in that way requires more than just good intentions. It requires more than a single decision once upon a time. To live by the "**wisdom from above**" requires nothing less than a daily, a moment by moment, turning to God as the source and center of life abundant. That doesn't just happen once in your life. It must keep on happening time and time again, until, after years of daily conversions, we learn at last to walk humbly with God and at peace with one another.

And on the way to the life abundant he offers us, as we are continually being formed and reformed by the wisdom from above, God keeps on providing all that need to live humbly and gratefully, in communion with Him, and in fellowship with all who share this bread and cup, throughout the world, and across the centuries. To God be the glory. Amen.

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