

JAMES 4: “THE SECRET OF CONTENTMENT”

(08/19/18)

Scripture Lesson: James 4:1-17
Exodus 20:1-17

“Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?” (James 4:1)

I need to begin our reflections this morning with an apology. At the coffee hour following our worship service several weeks ago, Beth Hook suggested that perhaps I was being a little tough on James in my sermons, e.g., accusing him of sibling rivalry to explain why he seems to leave Jesus, his biological brother, out of his teaching about Christianity. I am willing to admit that this is a possibility. When I have what I consider to be a brilliant idea, I can get a little carried away!

However, I am still not willing to retract either my theory or my emphasis on the centrality of Jesus in our faith. I am also not willing to retract my belief concerning the dangers of dualistic thinking and my criticism of those strains of Christian tradition that view creation, the world, and humanity as fallen, sinful, and evil, those schools of theology that call us as Christians to hate the world. I still believe this way of thinking devalues God’s creation and fails to grasp the deeper meaning of the incarnation of God’s Holy Spirit or Logos in matter.

In my defense, James borders on this type of unhealthy dualistic thinking when he says, “friendship with the world is enmity with God” and “whoever wishes to be a friend of the world is an enemy of God.” To be fair, however, when these verses are read in context I have to admit that James may not deserve the smackdown I gave him a couple of weeks ago. He was simply making a point, a point with which I basically agree.

In the beginning of chapter 4 James addresses the conflicts and disputes that characterized the early Christian church. He does so, interestingly, from what I would call a psychological perspective. He finds the root of social conflict within the psyche, within us as individuals. He tells us that our external conflicts are an expression of our inner conflicts, and that we can only resolve the former by paying attention to the latter. In this point, I totally agree with James!

James says, “Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?” When James speaks

of “friendship with the world,” he is probably referring to our egocentric quest for our own happiness and our tendency to see others as a means to this end. He is probably referring to our insatiable thirst for pleasure and our tendency to see anything that limits our pleasure as an injustice. James says, “You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.” This passage leads us back to the Ten Commandments, which we heard this morning, and the particularly puzzling last commandment--not to covet.

I can understand the role of most of the Ten Commandments in the formation of our relationship with God and our relationships with each other in human community. God tells us not to have any other gods before him; he tells us to place him in the center of our life. He tells us not to worship idols, to refrain from treating anyone or anything as a god when they are not God. He tells us not to make wrongful or casual use of his name, to keep it sacred. These commandments shape and define our relationship with God.

God tells us that we need to set aside time, either on a sabbath day or at various times every day, for prayer and spiritual reflection. These are essential disciplines in the deepening of our relationship with God and a central part of our own spiritual journey. We are told to honor our parents. This is essential to the preservation of family and the transmission of sacred traditions. God tells us not to murder, not to take human life. He tells us not to commit adultery, not to tear apart the fabric of marriage and family. He tells us not to lie or steal. These are fundamental guidelines for the formation of genuine community.

Then comes the kicker. The very last commandment is the directive not to covet.

What the heck is this all about? How did this one get in the same list as not to murder, lie, or steal? It seems to me that, of all the commandments, this is the most psychological. The others are all about behavior; this one is about the inner workings of our mind and how our thoughts and feelings shape our relationship with life. It also holds the key to the secret of contentment. When viewed in this light, I believe it is a very interesting and important commandment!

I understand there is a difference between jealousy and envy. Sometimes I grasp this difference while at other times I am not sure that I am using the words correctly. I believe that when we are jealous of someone, we want what that particular person has.

We want to be that person, to be in that person's place. Or jealousy may lead us to want to totally control the other person, as a jealous husband might, out of his insecurity, try to limit his wife's social contacts with other people, particularly with men.

I think we can see the danger in this. First, when we are jealous of another person, when we want to be another person, we devalue ourselves; we don't want to be ourselves, which may very well be "the sin against the Holy Spirit," the spirit of God within us. Second, jealousy, which arises from insecurity, often leads to anger and the desire to control. It can lead us to inflict pain on the person who is the object of our jealousy. When we try to totally possess or control another person, we take away that person's freedom and individuality—God's priceless gifts to that person.

Envy is a little different. When we feel envy, we would like to have the same kind of thing that the other person has. For example, when Darlene and I drive along the shore drive in Newport and I remark that I would love to own one of those mansions, I am not feeling jealous of the person who owns it. I do not want to be the person who owns that house and I do not necessarily want that particular house. I don't want to take it away from him/her; he/she may have worked very hard to own it. (Although chances are they inherited the mansion from their filthy rich parents who also gave them the 40' yacht that is moored downtown, and the person may not have worked a day in his/her life!). Wait a minute! From my thinly disguised feelings of anger and righteous indignation, I seem to be talking more about jealousy than envy. This is a little off the point I was trying to make. What I wanted to say is that what I was feeling toward the person who owned the mansion is envy. I would like to have the kind of magnificent house in the kind of beautiful location that that person does.

I think the commandment not to covet is talking more about jealousy than envy because it is quite specific in its directive not to covet your neighbor's wife or any of his other possessions. I'm not sure that the commandment forbids us to feel envy, because, at least at first glance, envy does not strike me as necessarily bad. It awakens our feelings. It draws us toward something we value. If we want it badly enough, we will do the hard work to obtain it. If we don't, then perhaps it is simply a wish or a fantasy. This is certainly the case for me in relation to the Newport mansions! I am not going to go

back to having three jobs or even taking on a morning paper route so I can own one of those houses!

The problem with envy, however, is that it is indicative of a lack of contentment. It can seduce us into thinking that the source of our happiness lies outside us, in some particular set of affairs. It can lead us to think that happiness is something toward which we strive, something that we will hopefully attain in the future. This way of thinking is a trap! It not only will not produce true happiness, it ensures that we will *never* be happy! The secret of happiness, of true contentment, lies in the acceptance of who we are and what we have in the present. It arises from seeing who we are and what we have as a blessing, as a gift from God, and then living each day fully with gratitude in our heart!

James says that when we want something that we do not have, we can be led to commit murder. I not only agree with James in this, I can't think of any cause of murder that is not grounded in wanting something that we do not have, even if that something is revenge. James tells us, "You covet something and cannot obtain it, so you engage in disputes and conflicts." Let me tell you, there is no truer statement about the source of conflicts in a marriage than this pithy statement of James. We want something from our partner and cannot obtain it, so we become angry. In this sense, when God gave us the commandment not to covet, whether he was speaking of jealousy or envy, God was right on target! Long before the emergence of psychology, God put his finger on the primary cause of human unhappiness and the root of interpersonal, national, and international conflict! (I'm sure God is thrilled to hear that I have given my stamp of approval on the psychological dimensions of his religious directives!)

James then switches gears. He says, "You do not have because you do not ask." Here James calls us to utilize the resources of prayer. He tells us that we do not receive from God because we do not ask. I think James is right on target in this! When we are passing through a difficult period in our life, do we take it to God in prayer or do we go through it alone, acting as if we had no other resource but ourselves? When our health fails, when we lose our job, when our child is born handicapped, when a loved one dies, when we experience conflict in our marriage, we need to be in prayer. When we do so, we increase the odds that we will see ourselves, the other person, and life as God sees

them; we increase the odds that we will take on both the heart and mind of Jesus in our response to the situation into which we have been thrown.

With regard to prayer James goes on to say, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly.” What does it mean to “ask wrongly?” It means to pray for personal benefits or gain. An example of this would be praying to win the lottery. When we do this, we are trying to manipulate God; we are trying to bend God’s will to ours. This kind of prayer arises from a lack of contentment with what we have and who we are in the present. To ask rightly is to pray as Jesus prayed: “Not my will, but thine be done.”

James describes those who are not faithful to God as “adulterers.” Perhaps this is the deeper meaning or the true meaning of the commandment not to commit adultery. The prophets pictured their covenant with God as a marriage, a marriage between God and Israel. The early Christian theologians spoke of the sacred marriage between God and the church. They referred to the church as the bride of Christ. Those who break the covenant are un-faithful adulterers.

In this context James tells us that God is a jealous God. I don’t think he means that God is insecure, mean-spirited, and controlling, the way human beings are when they are jealous. I think he means that God wants us to choose him. God yearns for the union, the reconnection, the reconciliation of our spirit with his Holy Spirit. In the words of the 42nd psalm, God wants us to long for him as a thirsty deer longs for flowing streams.

James tells us we need to submit to God, not as a slave to a master, but within the context of a sacred covenant. James reminds us, just in case we need to be reminded, that our relationship with God is not a relationship between equals. The word “submit” is appropriate to this relationship, as is James’s use of the word “humility.”

Finally, in verse 8 James tells us, “Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.” He calls us back to our relationship with God and the resources that are ours through this relationship. He reminds us of the power of prayer. To be fair to James, he is probably not telling us to hate the world and ourselves. He is probably not telling us that a true Christian should be miserable. He is telling us to embrace life with all its ups and downs, to receive this life with grateful hearts as a gift from God!

I not only totally agree with James in this; I think he has discovered the true secret of contentment!

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