

Sermon – 09/19/21

Text – James 3:13-4:10

Theme – “Fights and Quarrels”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As many of you know, before I went to seminary I was in the social work field, working primarily with families in crisis. Juvenile Delinquency. Child and spousal abuse. Substance abuse. Neglect. And on and on. But the thing is, many of those situations were caused by – or themselves caused – additional problems. All sorts of squabbles and fights and arguments. Even threats of violence or abandonment. It was *not* pretty.

As a pastor, I have seen some of the same things. And what always strikes me is that it is precisely here – in our families, where we should be safest and most loved – that we find the worst of our behavior. Things that we would excuse or at least tolerate in strangers, cause us to lash out and explode and hurt those closest to us.

Today we come to the third of our sermons based on the readings from St. James. As I have mentioned in the earlier sermons, James’ epistle is quite a practical one. He does a good job of cutting to the chase, of writing about how we ought to *live* the Christian faith. Last week he took on our hurtful/harmful words, and how we betray our sinful nature by what we say. Today he tackles our propensity, our tendency, our habit of in-fighting and quarreling. (pause)

Any kind of disturbance and trouble between people is bad enough, but when it crops up in families, the tragedy and pain are magnified. Well, James is writing to Christians – who are a family, the family of God – and he laments the quarrels and fights he knows that go on amongst them. But we

shouldn't think that sort of thing was unique to that particular congregation of saints to whom James was first writing, for we see it all the time in churches – including our own.

And when it does happen – here and elsewhere – there is always lots of self-justification that accompanies the arguing. I did this because you did that. You made me do it. And so on. But St. James lays bare the truth of the matter, the evil of the heart that wells up in such quarrels and fights. He writes:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this: that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people!

Wow, that hurts! We argue and fight and quarrel and bicker and pick at each other – and not out of some noble motive or lofty goal (as we like to pretend) but simply to satisfy and gratify our sinful nature. Our “passions” are at war within us, James says. Not passions in the romantic or sexual sense, but passions in the sense of brute and coarse and base drives. We want. We desire. We covet. We long for. We envy. We are jealous. It bothers us that we do not always get whatever it is that we want. And if someone else has it, or if someone else gets his way instead of us, we lash out in anger and resentment and fury.

James talks about murder as a result of this desiring, this overwhelming craving to have our way. Now, of course, we could claim that we are innocent of such – but then we would be lying, for the Bible (in fact, Jesus Himself!) tells us that when we act in such a hateful, loveless, selfish way we ARE guilty of murder. For God has made us to love, to care for, to help, to sacrifice ourselves for one another. And our failure to do so only shows just how far we have fallen from God's expectations and demands. No, the truth is that we when don't get what we want, when we find ourselves stymied and our plans thwarted, we often fly into a rage. We call names, we threaten, we insult, we impugn, we do all we can to destroy the other.

James further says that we don't have because we don't ask. He means we fail to ask God – the true Source of all good. If we are hungry, our first thought is not to pray but to find food ourselves. If we need money, we go to friends and family or banks but forget to come to the Lord. When sick, we neglect coming to the Great Physician. Oh, maybe we come to God as a last resort — when all else has failed — but that is not right. No, God should be the first One to whom we come with our needs and requests and desires. But we don't. We fail to ask Him as dear children asking their dear Father – that is, in faith, trusting His goodness and love. And so we do not have.

Or if we DO ask, quite often it is out of wrong or sinful motives. “God, make me rich and I will give part of it to the church.” “God, help me through this test because I failed to study.” “God, I know I have neglected You for a long time but if You get me out of this scape, I promise I will change.” “God, help me get that promotion so I can get even with those co-workers who bug me.” God wants to give us all good things, but not everything we want is good for us. For example, I know that if I was rich, I would probably not use that wealth well. It would become for me a constant temptation: to put my trust in it, to use it for my own selfish enjoyment, to lord it over others, and so on. Sometimes the best answer to our prayers and requests of God is “No” because our motives are all wrong.

Yes, James really lays bare our sinfulness, our hard hearts, our selfish nature. And it is this, he says, that leads us to our fights and squabbles and quarrels. Rather than thinking first of others, of sacrificing our own wants and desires for the neighbor, of being a servant of others – rather than that, we worship old Number One, ourselves. No wonder we have all sorts of arguments – with all sorts of little gods running around, all demanding our own way! (pause)

Our fights and quarrels and battles amongst ourselves as people all stem from our sinful nature. And infinitely worse than *those* fights are the fights that same sinful nature brings between us and God. The Bible tells us that the natural man (that is, man as he is by nature, apart from the saving work of

God) is at enmity, or war, with God. That sinful nature, which makes us see ourselves as god, can't abide the true God and so it lashes out at Him.

Lots of luck winning THAT war! But, in our stubborn and foolish and sinful way, we keep on fighting against God. Of course, the outcome of such enmity, hostility, warfare is eternal punishment: hell itself. The human condition is a frightful one, apart from the Lord. But, despite our unwarranted and unprovoked attacks against Him, God remains good and gracious and merciful. He does NOT abandon us to the consequences of our sin. No, He has come Himself to fix it, to restore us to the relationship of His beloved children again.

Of course, He has done that in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. God came down from heaven, took on our human flesh and blood, and became Man for us. But where we, though no true gods, exalt ourselves at the expense of others, Jesus – true God and true Man – has humbled Himself for our benefit. He has kept the Law and commandments. He has died the death of the cross to pay for all sin. He has risen from the grave to prove it. He has ascended into heaven to rule all things for our good.

Now, none of that is deserved or merited by us. None of that is required of God. He could certainly have just written us off forever. He could have simply left us to the just desserts of our sin: death and hell. But He did not. His grace shows us the opposite of our fighting and quarreling, for it shows true love. The innocent party in man's war against God has taken it upon Himself to suffer the loss. The One who ought to be served makes Himself the Servant of all. The sinless One takes all sin onto His back and carries it to the cross, where He endures the hell that belongs to us. In His life/death/resurrection Jesus has ended the war, He has stopped the fighting, He has ceased the quarrel between man and God. In Him you have forgiveness and peace. (pause)

So, we have been forgiven. We have had our foolish, losing battle against God ended, and He gives US the victory. In Christ, He promises – and gives – all things. So why then do we continue to

see fights and arguments among us who are Christians? Why can't we all just get along? Why do we find so much bickering and factionalism in the Church? And do those things mean that God's promise is not true, or that it is not *ours*?

Well, the first thing we need to recognize is that just because we are Christians does not mean that we have shed our sinful nature. That will not happen in this lifetime. No, only when we die is the Old Adam completely destroyed. Until then we live in constant struggle with ourselves – the Old Adam, the sinful nature, always trying to lead us astray, back into sin and death, while the new creation in Christ wants to follow the Law as God has given it to us.

You've all seen the cartoons where someone has an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. Well, in a way that is exactly what it is like as a Christian. And the devil will not leave us alone: he will come at us with all he has, trying to get us to lose faith, to slide back into his pocket. But we have the assurance that God will not let us be snatched away from Him: we are His and He will keep us from the Evil One.

But in the meantime, as we slog through life with that constant battle going on within us, that Old Adam sometimes does win. He gets us to do the very things of which James writes in our text: the quarrels, the fights, the covetous desires, the selfish attitudes which all too often we display. And when that happens, James' description fits us well: we show ourselves to be adulterous/sinful people – people who are not faithful to God.

And yet, miracle of miracles, God remains faithful to us! He comes to us, again and again, to bestow that forgiveness upon us whenever and as often as we sin. Think about it. Every day you sin, and yet He is still your Father. He is still the One who loves you. And that is because He showers us with His Gospel of forgiveness each day. We have it in the Word as we read it and study it in home and family devotions, as well as in Sunday School and Bible class. We have it as we daily remember our

baptism, where we were washed clean of our sin as Christ's blood was applied to us by name. We have it in the absolution where the pastor – speaking in the stead and by the command of Christ Himself, remember – forgives us all our sin. We have it in the liturgy and hymns and lessons and sermon of the worship service. We have it in the Lord's Supper, where He gives us to eat and drink His very Body and Blood for the forgiveness of our sins and the strengthening of our so often weak and tottering faith. And we have it in what the Lutheran Confessions call the "*mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren*" — that is, as we Christians share this forgiveness with one another in word and deed.

Our God is indeed a gracious God. The richness of His love and forgiveness overflow. As great of sinners as we are, He is an even greater Savior. No sin is more than He can handle (in fact, He has already handled it – at the cross!). As we focus on *that*, as we feed upon Christ by faith, as we receive forgiveness, we will find that we are better able to forgive others when they sin against us. The fighting and quarreling and bickering dies out when we stop focusing on ourselves, and instead see Christ – and Him crucified – for us. And for ALL people.

How can we NOT love them, since our Lord has loved them unto death (just as He did us)? How can we bash and trash and smash one another to get such trifling and temporary things as lie at the root of our fights? No, we have heaven! What can compare with that? We have peace with God, and so we have peace with one another too. And all as a free gift of God's love and grace, given us in our Savior Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS – Nicene Creed
FE – Offertory/Offering