

Series Title: “Epistles Offer Practical Guidance”

20 September 2015: 17th Sunday after Pentecost

FUMC—Arlington, TX 76011

“The War Within You”—Preaching Text: James 3:13—14:3; 7-8a

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“The greatest war every fought, and are still fighting,
where more people have been defeated and died,
is the war within” (Anthony Liccione).

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Hear the day’s lesson:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. 15 Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. 16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

4:1 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? 2 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. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures

7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8a Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you (James 3:13—14:3; 7-8a).

The literary genre or category of James is paraenesis, or moral exhortation (or advice, counsel). In James’ 108 verses there are 54 imperatives (musts, shoulds, oughts, etc.). Perhaps this fact accounts as to why so many church folk don’t like James too much. We church folks don’t generally like to be told what to do. In addition, although scholars classify James as an epistle, curiously James as a letter has more in common with the content of long-established Wisdom literature like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon than with Paul or Peter’s New Testament epistles.

Sometimes we get the impression that James writes to individuals to help them live better Christian lives. The example of controlling the tongue seems aimed at individuals rather than a group. Yet, it is hard to imagine a “group tongue.” Thus we assume that James doles out his “musts, shoulds, and oughts” to individuals. When James writes: “Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?” he suggests individuals are undone by our inner struggles. We all surely know that feeling, don’t we? Occasionally we will hear people speak of “the human struggle,” or “the human condition.” This describes the inner struggles that many human beings have when we are trying to decide between good and evil or overcome our self-doubts.

Our conflict has both internal and external aspects, as obstacles outside us sometimes force us to deal with inner issues. This means that all of us have internal battles that we wage within ourselves. We regularly base our actions and motivations on others and our dealings with them. I suppose Helen Keller was onto something when she said: “Happiness cannot come from without. It must come from within. It is not what we see and touch or that which others do for us which makes us happy; it is that which we think and feel and do, first for the other fellow and then for ourselves.”

Watching someone’s inner struggles is both engaging and terrifying at the same time. Like a train wreck we cannot avert our eyes. Some of you no doubt remember the Academy Award winning film for Best Picture called *A Beautiful Mind*. It is the story of a genius at Princeton University, John Nash, who battles the onset of schizophrenia and his own defiant personality. In time he more or less succeeds in both his personal relationships and career. This movie is about struggling with one’s demons—almost literally. We could think of other films that depict to one degree or another these themes of persons against him or herself—Rocky or Schindler’s List to name but two examples. If we think of the battle within, then we often think of fighting demons. “People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the

sun is out, but when the darkness sets in; their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within” (Elisabeth Kubler-Ross).

Yet if we read the context of James’ letter with care, then we note that James in fact writes about church/congregational conflict that can tear it apart from within. It addresses the community of faith. We know that inside any family or associative community we will experience disagreement. Sometimes it is minor—like whether or not we do the announcements at the beginning of worship or the end. Occasionally the conflict is more substantial—can the youth group use “our” elegant parlor or not.

James examines church conflict. What he thinks he sees there is a universal attitude at the heart of the church conflict which is an way of behaving. That behavior can reveal the sin of envy (3:16; 4:1-3). James calls it by different names—selfish ambition, cravings, coveting—but it is basically the same thing. James knows that people too often yearn for for more and often ask for the wrong things. This envy and lust for our way can escalate into violence until the taking ends in death.

James helps the congregation here check itself against its profession. In some ways, I suppose it is much like what Paul recommended to the church at Rome. There Paul writes: “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor” (Romans 12:9-10).

Like the battle within ourselves, we as a body of Christ have similar battles too. Paul asks another congregation at Corinth with similar issues:

If all were a single member, where would the body be? . . . But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it (1 Corinthians 12, selected verses).

Victor Hugo was a nineteenth century poet, novelist, and playwright and had great insight

into the human condition. In his story, *Ninety-Three*, a ship is caught in a terrific storm, and when it is at its height, the frightened crew hear a terrible crashing sound below the deck. They know what it is. A cannon they are carrying has broken loose and is crashing into the ship's sides with every smashing blow of the sea. Two men at the risk of their lives manage to fasten it again, for they know that it is more dangerous than the storm.

That clearly depicts human life. It is not the storm outside which is our greatest danger. Rather it is that terrible corruption loose within us that will send us to the bottom. Until we can be saved from that there is not any hope for us. Some power has to help keep safe and sane the wild enemy within. An African proverb puts it well: "When there is no enemy within, the enemies outside cannot hurt you." And what is true for individuals is perhaps even more true for a community of faith—or even a church. Amen.

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