

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – B (Proper 20)  
Text – James 4:1

LSB # 555 v. 1-3, 6, 9

What causes quarrels & what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?

## AT WAR WITHIN

There's a prayer that's become well known around the world, titled, *The Serenity Prayer*. "God grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; & wisdom to know the difference." With the ever increasing # of Alzheimer's patients, now there's a new prayer called, *The Senility Prayer*.

If you're dealing with a friend or loved one who has Alzheimer's this may not be all that funny, but this new prayer highlights the all too common experience of knowing people you just find difficult to take. "Grant me the senility to forget the people I never liked anyway, the good fortune to run into the ones I do like, & the eyesight to tell the difference."

None of us gets along well with everyone in this life. Some people flat out make us crazy, but James is teaching that in our struggles with other people, the root of the conflict always lies within us. Granted, those same roots lie within the people we dislike, but we can't change them. God has not given us that ability.

God doesn't overlook our responsibility when we don't change our own actions. We hear that in the language James uses, "Cleanse your hands... purify your hearts... Humble yourselves." Jesus echoes that in the Gospel reading, "If anyone would be 1<sup>st</sup>, he must be last of all & servant of all." That would mean being a servant even of those who make us crazy.

The Word of God is saying that when a particular person is driving me mad, the reaction is begun by what's going on within me, rather than what's going on because of that person outside of me. You've been in those shoes. You're feeling just plain ornery & no matter who

comes your way, they irritate you, but the irritation began with you, not with them. As the sermon text put it, “What causes quarrels & what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?” The warring passions, you & I are failing to control within, then produce an unfortunate result. Jesus once asked a question to drive at that point:

“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” For our purposes today we might ask, “Why do we spend so much time worrying & complaining about, or making trouble over, other people’s thoughts, words & deeds, when we cannot competently control our own?”

You see, it’s not just America’s ‘welfare culture’ that teaches people to play the victim & blame others for their problems. Adam & Eve instinctively did it after their very 1<sup>st</sup> sin. As young children, we know very well how to say, “He started it!” Playing the victim is part of the essence of our sinful nature.

Finding the speck in our brother’s eye is so much easier than dealing with the log that’s in our own. Haven’t you tried to quit smoking or biting your nails? Haven’t you tried to give up procrastinating, or micro-managing the responsibilities of others? Have you found it impossible to surrender those juicy opportunities to complain about family or neighbors?

The bait Satan uses is certainly tempting, isn’t it? And it’s hard to pass up a good juicy snack. Our sinful nature loves to eat, but I’m not just talking about food. The Apostle James is speaking of our appetite for sin. “What causes quarrels & what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?”

It’s okay to disagree with each other’s opinions, but quarreling & fighting goes beyond mere disagreement. Those come from the passions at war within each of us & like a good parent our Father in heaven expects His children to control those passions so as to put others first, &

ourselves last. *The Serenity Prayer* is useful in guiding our thought processes when our passions are at war within: “God grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change...” For me, those include all of you sinners out there, & each of you could say the same. We can’t change others, but we can reject our own sinful desire to quarrel & fight since the Holy Spirit lives within us.

So why don’t we reject those sinful desires more often? Why do we keep embarrassing ourselves through quarreling & fighting, especially among our Christian brothers & sisters? In verse 16 of the Epistle reading, it says, “For where jealousy & selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder & every vile practice.”

Don’t those strike you as overly strong words? They couldn’t apply to me. This text must be talking about someone else? ***PAUSE***

Why don’t we reject those sinful desires more often? James goes on in verse 6 of the Epistle reading, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, & he will flee from you.”

But our pride gets in the way, doesn’t it? If quarreling & fighting, complaining & bickering, dissatisfaction & being despondent are the aroma of our lives, we have only ourselves to blame. According to Scripture it’s clear; jealousy & selfish ambition are having their way with us. When we are strong, we do not submit to God. We do not resist the devil.

Quarreling & fighting are the result of our inability to practice the fruit of the Spirit called self-control. If we were spiritually mature, like the Apostle Paul, we would be content in all circumstances. So let any quarreling & fighting that arises be a warning to each one of us individually, that our pride is ruling the day.

James wrote of the remedy, “Be wretched & mourn & weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning & your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, & He will exalt you.

...God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Quarreling & fighting, complaining & bickering, dissatisfaction & being despondent, those are the fruits of our sinful desires – pride, jealousy & selfish ambition. God does not overlook our responsibility when we do not change our own actions, & yet, expect that we will be able to changes the actions of others. **PAUSE**

So that we might be saved in spite of our pride, jealousy & selfish ambition, Yahweh held His only begotten Son accountable, on our behalf, at the cross of Calvary. That incredible love, shown to us because we are sinners, is what draws us away from our pride, from our jealousy, & from our selfish ambition.

In the love of God’s Son we find a better way of life. For the love of God’s Son we put ourselves last, & others first, thus finding joy & peace & wisdom. The quarreling & fighting subside as we submit to God’s will, trusting & knowing that in Christ God is working all things together for the good of those who love Him.

With Christ’s love ruling our hearts, we work at restraining the evil promptings of our heart. With Christ’s strength we fight against our sinful desires to be right, to be strong & to be independent of others. Through the miracle of God’s forgiveness & healing we bring peace, instead of quarreling, into the lives of our brothers & sisters in Christ.

And though Jesus has risen from the dead thousands of years ago, His love & His power, are still proclaimed & made known today as the Good News of Gospel is spoken here in this place, & as it’s spoken in your schools & homes & workplaces.

As we speak the Words of God to family & co-workers & acquaintances, we bring the love of Christ Himself into their hurting & broken lives. We bring peace & understanding into hearts which were once conflicted & calloused & confused by sin. As we allow the peace of God to live within our hearts, to resolve the conflicts that are raging in our own emotions, then

we no longer bring quarreling & fighting into the lives of those around us. Jesus has won, not just the victory over the world, but the victory over your sinful heart & the victory over mine. It is that news which brings us the utmost in peace & joy, humility & thankfulness. For that, God is indeed to be praised. Amen.

Since Christ has full atonement made & brought to us salvation, each Christian therefore may be glad & build on this foundation. Your grace alone, dear Lord, I plead, Your death is now my life indeed, for You have paid my ransom. Faith clings to Jesus' cross alone & rests in Him unceasing; & by its fruits true faith is known, with love & hope increasing. For faith alone can justify; works serve our neighbor & supply the proof that faith is living. Amen.