

“The War Within”

Salado UMC—23 September 2018: 18th after Pentecost

Preaching Text: James 3:13—4:3, 7-8a—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

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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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People are funny creatures. We each have our pride which often motivates us to be better people. Often, we accomplish things we would not accomplish without it. Yet, pride makes us do things we know that we should not do. Did you hear about the clever salesperson that closed hundreds of sales with this line: “Let me show you something several of your neighbors said you couldn’t afford.” Hear the day’s lesson that in part has to do with selfish ambition and envy—each a form of pride:

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).

Scholars characterize James’ literary genre/type of writing as *paraenesis*, or moral exhortation (advice, counsel). In James’ 108 verses there are 54 imperatives (musts, shoulds, oughts, etc.). Perhaps this fact accounts as to why many church folks don’t have a soft spot in their heart or theology for James. Church people—or any people— don’t like to be told what to do. Further, while scholars classify James as an epistle, curiously James has more in common with other Wisdom literature genres such as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, or the Wisdom of Solomon than with our other 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. And, of course, it is hard for us to imagine a “group tongue.” Thus, we assume that James doles out his “musts, shoulds, and oughts” mostly 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.” These sorts

of description define the inner struggles that most human beings have. Our struggles often occur when we try to decide between good and evil or overcome our self-doubts.

Our conflict has both internal and external aspects. Regularly obstacles outside us force us to deal with our inner issues. We all have inner struggles. We all 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.”

When we watch another’s inner struggle, it both engages and terrifies us. Like a train wreck, we cannot avert our eyes. Some of you no doubt remember the Academy Award winning film for Best Picture in 2001 called *A Beautiful Mind*. It is the story of Princeton University genius, John Nash, who battles the onset of schizophrenia and his own defiant personality. In time, Nash more or less succeeds in his personal relationships and career. *A Beautiful Mind* is about tussling with one’s demons—almost palpably. We could think of other films that depict these themes of persons with the self—*Rocky* or *Schindler’s List* come to mind as other 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).

If we read the context of James’ letter with care, however, then we note that James in fact writes about church conflict that can tear a congregation apart. James addresses the community of faith. We know that inside any family or connected community, we may well experience disagreement. Sometimes it is minor— in the vein of whether or not we do announcements at the start or end of worship. Often the conflict is more significant—can we genuinely welcome people in who are not like us?

James examines church conflict. What he thinks he sees is that there is a universal attitude at the heart of church conflict. It is a way of behaving. Behavior reveals the sin of envy (3:16; 4:1-3). James calls it by diverse names—selfish ambition, cravings, coveting—but these behaviors are all chiefly alike. James knows that people too often yearn 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 church here check itself against its profession. In some ways, it may be like what Paul advised 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—that has 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 French poet, novelist, and playwright. Hugo also had great insight into the human condition. In his story *Ninety-Three* a ship is caught in a terrific storm. When the storm is at its worst, the frightened crew hears a terrible crashing sound below the deck. They know

what it is. A cannon on board the ship has broken loose. It 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 the canon is far more dangerous than the storm.

That illustration of a canon 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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