

*Sermon for Proper 20, Year B  
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20 September, 2009*

“God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

In our Epistle reading today, St. James gives us pictures of what pride and humility look like as they work on a community of faith like ours. And they are pictures to which we need to pay attention.

First of all, we need to clarify the context of what is being said. The talk about wars can sometimes muddy the water when dealing with this passage. So some people start to think that we’re talking about nations and larger political situations. But St. James is writing to Christians. And the wars and killing to which he refers are metaphors for the deadly way in which Christians sometimes treat each other, regardless of our Lord’s commands. I think the principles that James lays out can be applied to a larger context. Reality is reality and humans are humans, no matter where we find them. But what St. James is writing about is *us* and how we treat each other. And he has some painful observations to make.

First of all, pride. Pride is selfishness and self-centeredness. Pride is putting myself in the center of the universe. Pride is when I make myself and my own desires the measure of all things. We’re not talking here about a healthy sense of self-worth. We’re talking here about someone who simply considers himself first, before anything else. And it leads to all kinds of terrible things.

“Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.” The word that’s translated “selfish ambition” here isn’t referring to someone who has an ambitious plan for his life. It comes from a word meaning “day laborer” and so it comes to mean someone who is only thinking about how to satisfy his own desires right now, someone who is competitive with others over the smallest trifle. And this sort of attitude leads to a community that has no peace. It is in disorder and disarray. There is no unity, because certain people are seeking their own desires, rather than the will of God. And when that happens, all kinds of worthless behavior will inevitably crop up. Even if there is Godly leadership in such a place, it will be dealing constantly with the results of the tumult, rather than leading a unified community.

All this is the result of pride, of putting myself and my own desires before others. “What causes wars,” St. James asks, “and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members?” Not only does the prideful person have trouble recognizing the claims that other people have on him, he also finds it impossible to sort out his own conflicting desires. We’ve all had that experience of desiring different things at the same time. But the prideful person has made his own lusts the center of the universe, and so he cannot bring them under control, even if he wanted to do so.

And St. James tells us that it is because of these passions and lusts that we fight amongst ourselves. We hurt each other, because we are slaves to these desires. “You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war.” Remember, he’s talking about us, right here in the church. Pride puts us under the heel of our passions and desires, and then we attack each other because of them. Don’t try to tell me it doesn’t happen here, because I see it and hear it all the time.

The thing is ... our passions might masquerade as a desire for good things. Here’s one that haunts me: We might desire more people at Holy Nativity. That’s a good thing. But do we desire more people so that they will take the burden of paying for all this off of us? Do I desire it because it represents worldly success for me as a pastor? Do we really desire to bring people into relationship with Jesus Christ, or are we really looking out for our own lusts? You see the complexity of the problem.

Or we might have any number of desires about what happens at Holy Nativity. They might be about programs, or about how the Rector treats people, or about how the money gets spent. I have desires about how all of you should treat me and my family. And then there are all those unruly desires that we all have: to be liked, to be strong, to be in charge, to be taken care of, to be admired, to be influential. None of these things, taken by themselves, are necessarily wrong. But if we operate out of pride they will eat our lunch. If we put them at the center of our reality and allow them to dominate us and control us, we will destroy each other and turn our church family into a wasteland.

“You do not have,” St. James writes, “because you do not ask.” So some of these things we would presumably receive as blessings, if we would only ask. But what if we *have* asked, you say? Well, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.” In other words, is it a matter of pride? Do you want it because you’ve asked God for a pure heart and believe that the

desire is his also? Or is it just what you want, regardless? Is it a matter of control, or is it a matter of faithfulness? Is it a gnawing sense of neediness and fear that drives you into action? Or is it love for Jesus and his body?

In our translation, St. James calls us “Unfaithful creatures”. But in the Greek, that’s not quite what he says. The word is “adulteresses”. The translators have cleaned it up and taken its sting away. “You harlots!” That’s what the apostolic writer calls us. We wallow in our poisonous passions and the lusts lurking in our unsubmitted and disobedient hearts. We cozy up to the worldly forces of darkness that fight against God, because they seem powerful and influential. And in our overweening but insensible pride we think we can use that power and influence to achieve our own desires.

But there is an alternative. The alternative is humility. Humility isn’t being a doormat for Jesus. Or for anyone else for that matter. Humility is the opposite of pride. If pride is having an overblown view of myself, then humility is having a realistic view of myself. Humility means loving myself for what and who God made me to be. Humility is taking my proper place in the order of creation and the order of the church and doing what I am called to do as a beloved child of God.

St. James describes this humility for us: “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity.” Rather than having a war of passions inside, the humble man is pure, filled with the one purpose of serving God. Instead of tearing down his brothers, he is strong enough to be peaceful and gentle. He can listen to the perspective of other people and hear honest arguments for other people’s ideas. Because he has a realistic understanding of his own flaws, he can be “full of mercy” with those of others. And rather than worrying and gossiping about other people’s sins and weaknesses, he can concentrate on his own work of producing good fruit in the service of the Lord. And because he genuinely good, he doesn’t need to put on an act to try to convince people of his sincerity and friendliness. It’s real.

The community that grows from such an attitude is peaceful. “And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” If everyone gets comfortable with humility and takes on their proper place in service to God and to each other in our community, then we could stop tearing each other down. We could stop our wars and infighting. If we allowed our Lord to free us from our jealousy and covetousness and rivalry and all of our passions, we could make peace. God would give grace to the humble. And grace and peace would reign over our church.