

## Conflict in the Church James 4:1-12

September 20, 2009

Conflict in the church. How can that be? Is there really quarreling, fighting, tension, and dissension among the people of God? Some years ago the Lutheran Witness printed an article by a pastor's wife who lamented the unchristian character of many members of the congregation, conduct that brought her husband to the brink of resigning his position. Letters in response to that article indicated that this was not an isolated or rare situation. Christians often do not talk or act like Christians. All of us, pastors and lay people, men and women, young and old, have a long way to grow in godliness. While it may be true that, by God's grace, we aren't what we used to be (hopefully some sinful practices have been done away with), nevertheless, when it comes to living our Christian faith, we are still far from being what God wants us to be. So James offers some guidelines for godly living in our Epistle today that are important for us to examine and live by.

Godliness begins with a right relationship with God. True, there is often fighting and conflict among the people of God, within the church. But an even deeper problem is the conflict between people and God. James gets right to the heart of the matter in verse 1. "What causes quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the desires that battle within you?" The problem begins with sinful human hearts. Jesus said, "Out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, and slander" (Matt. 15:19).

The sinful heart is more concerned with self than others. The sinful heart isn't the least bit interested in what God wants and desires. James identifies human pride as the basic problem. He quotes from Proverbs 3. "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." This tendency to think too much of ourselves and not enough of God is the most basic sin and it goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. The fall into sin was triggered by a suggestion that Adam and Eve could be more like God. The serpent said to Eve, "God knows that when you eat of (this fruit) your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). That was quite a temptation- to be like God, to be in charge, to be important, to make my own rules. Life in this world has not been the same since that first sin. The truth is we are more alike than different from Adam and Eve. We too often put ourselves, our wants, our desires, before God and others. This sinful pride and selfishness leads to much strife and conflict in the world around us, but also in our families and in our church.

The old Adam in each of us, our sinful nature, makes it so difficult for us to resolve conflict. We want to be right, we don't want to be wrong. We find it so hard to say "I was wrong. I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

To be godly means to submit to God's will and God's way. But so often we want it my way. Frank Sinatra sang a song like that years ago. "I did it my way!" James and John, two of Jesus' disciples, got into trouble once when they put human pride and ego before God's will and God's way. They argued about who was the greatest among the disciples. They asked for places of honor and power in the kingdom of heaven; to sit at the right and left of Jesus in eternity. And Jesus gave them a little lesson on humility. "The first shall be last and the last shall be first."

The writer, Robert A. Raines, wrote these insightful words that describe the problem James identifies in our text:

I am like James and John, Lord.

Lord, I size up other people in terms of what they can do for ME,

How they can further MY program, feed MY ego,

Satisfy MY needs, give ME strategic advantage.

I exploit people, ostensibly for your sake, but really for MY own sake.

Lord, I turn to YOU to get the inside track and obtain special favors,

YOUR direction for my schemes,

YOUR power for my projects,

YOUR sanction for my ambitions,

YOUR blank check for whatever I want.

I am like James and John.

Change me, Lord. Make me a man who asks of you and of others, What can I do for you?

The sinful heart needs to change. But how does this change happen? How do we fix our broken relationship with God? It happens at the baptismal font. There at the font, when you were baptized, God washed your sins away and established a brand new relationship with you. The forgiveness that Jesus earned at the cross by his suffering and death was given to you. You became a child of God, forgiven in Christ Jesus. You were given the power and strength to fight against the attacks of Satan, the world, and the sinful nature. Godliness begins with a right relationship with God. Sin separates us from God but the forgiveness God offers in Christ restores and rebuilds our relationship with Him again and again. And so we come week after week to confess our sins, to hear God's Word and promises to us, to be assured again and again that God loves us and forgives us in Christ.

Our Christian faith, this close, personal, intimate relationship with God, shows itself in our daily living and our relationships with other people. The sinful human heart, human pride and selfishness, is the cause of conflict between God and his people. This human pride and selfishness is often the cause of conflict and fighting between people as well. This kind of conflict is especially damaging in the church.

The church has a mission. We have a mission here at Covenant - to seek the lost and to connect people to life in Jesus Christ. How are we doing in that mission? What might be hindering the mission? One of the greatest threats to our mission at Covenant is the inability of people to work together in harmony. We might think there are outside factors that are affecting our mission; things like a changing neighborhood, fewer members to be involved in the mission. Certainly the devil is always working against the mission of the church. But I think the greatest challenge to our mission comes from within. If we don't work together, if we get caught up in jealousy, envy, conflict, fighting, even apathy, we won't be able to do the work God has given us to do. We get caught up in – this is what I think, this is what I want, this is the way I think it should be – instead of asking – what does God want? And that's what James warns against today – human pride, a me-first attitude instead of asking – how can I meet the needs of others and serve others?

Our text today is a call to godly living. Put away conflict, envy and strife. Live in harmony with each other. Forgive one another as God forgives you. Love one another as God has first loved you. The power to do that comes from our relationship with God. In Christ we are blessed with a new life. And James reminds us of some of the characteristics of this new life.

1. **Our new life does not criticize or condemn others.** James says in verse 11 “Brothers, do not slander one another.” When we criticize others in a way that is hurtful, when we speak unkind or untrue words about others, we sin against the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment. We need to stop and think about the words we speak – do they build up and encourage others, or do they hurt and tear down other people.
2. **Our new life does not judge others.** It’s so easy to judge others, to question their motives, to think that we are better. James reminds us that God alone is the judge. I’m reminded of the words of Jesus to the proud Pharisees. “First take the log out of your own eye before you point out the speck in your brother’s eye.” The story is told of a young man who was walking home from work late at night because there was a bus strike going on. As he took a shortcut through the park in the city, he and another man bumped into each other. A few moments later, the young man had occasion to reach for his wallet and it was not in his pocket. He ran back and found the young man who had bumped into him. He demanded his wallet. The other young man was scared and surrendered a wallet. The young man felt good; he had stood up for himself. When he got home, the first thing he saw was his own wallet on his night stand. We need to be careful how we address rights and wrongs in the church. Mercy is always better than the mouth in the church house.
3. **Our new life refrains from boasting.** “Do not think of yourselves more highly than you ought to.” We are humble not boastful. We understand that any good we do is not our doing, but God working in us.
4. **Our new life uses material blessings for the benefit of others.** In verse 4 James says, “Anyone who chooses to be a friend of this world becomes an enemy of God.” The world has a different attitude toward money and material things than the child of God. We understand that material things are fleeting, the goal of life is not to accumulate as much as you can, to trample others in the quest for more. The money and material things we have are gifts from God and he wants us to use them wisely. And so we share with others, we give to others. We help the poor and needy. We give our offerings for the spread of the Gospel, for the mission of the church. In chapter 5 James has much to say about greed and materialism. He says the godless place a high premium on wealth which will not last. The godless use their wealth to indulge themselves. And ultimately they will be punished for their misuse of wealth.
5. **Our new life in Christ gives us unity of purpose and mission.** I hope you will truly take to heart the words of our text today. Think about conflict and quarreling. Are you angry with someone, upset about something? Is there a conflict that is keeping you from serving and giving as God desires? We need to resolve those conflicts. We need to confess and forgive. We need to love one another. Only then can we move forward in mission, only then can we all pull together in the same direction to seek the lost and connect them to life in Jesus.

I am reminded of the story of the young boy who was being harassed by the class bully. One day in the class, the conflict came to a boiling point. The young boy took a twig and drew a line in the dirt on the playground and declared, "I double-dare you to cross that line." The bully boldly stepped across the line. "Okay," said the boy, "now you are on my team."

James tells us that everything we need to live in love and harmony in the Body of Christ has been given to us. Through faith in Jesus Christ, standing on that solid foundation of God’s Word and by the power of the Spirit, we can live godly lives; lives that are pleasing to God and a blessing to others.

May God guide us! And keep us! And bless us! Amen.