

September 23, 2012 “The War Within” Mark 9:30-37 James 3:13 - 4:3, 4:7-8

Writing to the early Christians in Rome, the Apostle Paul wrestled with himself as he, in the midst of encouraging folks to life-changing faith in the grace of God, declared, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but do the very thing I hate.” (Romans 7:15)

It’s always been this way. Before God proclaimed God’s love through Jesus, God asked God’s children to be obedient to him, and the people failed just about every step of the way. Adam and Eve could not obey one little rule. The Hebrew people in the wilderness let themselves be ruled by fear and ended up making an idol out of gold to worship, instead of God, when Moses was away on the mountain too long. King David was so led by lust that he had the husband of the woman he got pregnant killed.... “The good that I would do, I do not; and the evil I would not do, I do.”

Probably every person here can identify with this in some way or another. Certainly the disciples of Jesus could, especially that day we heard about from Mark’s 9th chapter, where Jesus was trying to share with them his heaviest burden, the fact that he would have to go to Jerusalem to die, and instead of listening to him and understanding him or at least asking him questions about what he had said, they “protected” themselves by arguing over their own status. “I’m the best disciple...” “No, I’ve been with him longer than you...” “He took *me* up on the mountain...”

But they got caught. Jesus asked them, when they stopped walking, “What were you talking about as we walked along?” They didn’t tell him, they were silent, but he knew. So he gave them – and us - a teaching and a warning: Whoever would be first must be willing to be last of all and servant of all.” Then Jesus took a child – who in those days was about as much of a “nobody” as one could find – and said, “Whoever receives one such child receives me...”

Now we need to understand something. Children were not doted on back in Jesus’ day. They didn’t get “oohs and aah’s” when they entered the world (which makes the birth story of Jesus even more amazing), and folks didn’t let them be the center of attention. Children were supposed to do what they were supposed to do: grow up to help support their parents. About 50% of them died as children. They were the “least” until they could earn their keep.

This means that when Jesus took time to talk about and interact with children, it was unsettling to the people. Jesus was saying, This is the way it is with God: the ones nobody thinks are important have great worth...and if you want to meet me, you must do it through the very people you would overlook, the ones who have no power to do anything for you!”

Writer/Episcopal priest/professor Barbara Brown Taylor offers a wonderful image of this passage: “‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all,’ Jesus told them. Then he showed them what he meant by taking a little child in his arms. They wanted to know who was greatest, so he showed them: twenty-six inches tall, limited vocabulary, unemployed, zero net worth, nobody. God’s agent. The last, the least of all.” (*Bread of Angels*, p. 134) In

other words, God looks at things differently than we do. God's ways are NOT our ways. And God yearns for us to trust God enough to let God show us that God's ways are better for us than our ways.

So the disciples heard this, and the early Christians heard this, and we have heard this, and yet, does this really affect how we go through our lives? Instead of seeking to be "last" and to reach out to those in our world who have no status or power, we still tend to try to "get ahead" in life, just like the people in James' day did.

In Chapter 4, James asked, "What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you?...You desire and do not have, so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."

A pastor named James Bethune wrote a sermon on this text, and suggested that perhaps our prayers should be from the very beginning, "Lord, what do YOU want?" Maybe, when we're figuring out our goals and dreams we should begin with, "God, what can I do for *you*?" Too often, suggests Bethune, our prayers are self-centered and reinforce the angst that accompanies our drive to fulfillment. Bethune connects our difficulties with "finding what we want" with what he refers to as a "broken wanter," where we spend our time and energy wanting the wrong things! Quoting James 4:1-3 and referring to the "battles within" which lead us to engage in conflicts and disputes, a resolution is revealed: "Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you" (James 4:7). (As shared in *Lectionary Homiletics*)

The war within. We know the story of Jesus and his call to us to embrace the powerless, to let go our addiction of trying to be "important" and "successful" in this world. We know that he told us to lose our lives if we really want to find them...and we've heard the promise that God's grace is sufficient for all our needs. But we still battle within ourselves. I do. I get caught up in the world's get-ahead games and lose sight of what the *real* contest is: to love God and to love others.

An old story tells of a spider who got mixed up about what was important. A spider once built his web in a barn, high among the rafters, where he started by spinning a long, thin thread attached to the end of one of the beams. With this thread still attached to him, the spider jumped off the beam and spun out more thread on the way down, until he reached the place he planned to have as the center of his web. From the center, he then spun out other threads like the spokes of a wheel, attaching each end of them to the walls and other places. Finally he had an exquisitely made web that helped him catch many fine fat flies. But he grew fat, and lazy, and vain.

One day, while admiring the web he had spun, he noticed the long fine thread he had first spun from the top beam and said, "I wonder what that is for? I can't imagine why I ever put it there; it doesn't catch any flies." On a sudden impulse he broke it. As a

result, the whole wonderful web collapsed. The spider had forgotten that the one thread - the link to the strongest beam above - supported the whole web. (Remembered; source unknown)

We, too can lose sight of what is important for our lives; we can get quite lost in this rat-race, get-ahead world. Even Christians can fall into the trap of competing with each other, thus losing sight of the call of our Lord to LOVE GOD and LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS. The good we would do, we do not as we chase after what looks like "success."

But what about Jesus? If I really trust him, why do I get so stressed when I deal with my family or find myself unable to keep up with all the needs of the congregation? If I really trust him and want to be like him, why do I get so irritated and angry when other folks cut in front of me in a line? If I am seeking first God's kingdom, why do I feel jealous when another pastor makes more money or receives a lot of praise for something? Why can't I say and *mean*, "Lord, what do YOU want?" "God, what can I do for you?"

Jesus lifted that child so long ago... and after his death and resurrection, Jesus lifted Peter even though Peter, cursing, had sworn he never even knew Jesus. Jesus offered him forgiveness and a new mission: "Feed my sheep, tend my flock." (John 21:17) ... So Jesus touched the untouchables, the lepers in his earthly days, and even us in this year 2012.

God knows the wars within us. God sees our sins. He understands our fears and our needs. God asks us to seek God's way for our lives, so that we can find the bread that *does* satisfy, the life that cannot be snuffed out even when our hearts stop beating.... God can help us see what is really important, even the way to life. As James declared, "Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you...Humble yourself before the Lord, and God will lift you up."

If the world is scary; if the kingdom of God doesn't seem very visible; if the world seems too full of difficult people, take heart: God is in the midst of it all. Just when the webs of life seem most tangled or frightening, we are promised an everlasting and unfailing support: God.

May the Spirit of the Living God lay a healing hand on our hearts, right now and as we move through our complicated world and the days ahead, that we may dare to let the way of the Lord prevail in the war within us. In Jesus' name, Amen.