THOSE WHO WANT TO MAKE PEACE

September 23, 2018

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

Our lesson from James for today reads like a page right out of a psychoanalyst’s textbook. “If you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it, so you commit murder. You covet something and cannot obtain it, so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly in order to spend what you get on your own pleasures.”

These revelatory words go right to the heart of our humanity and are descriptive of so many of the dynamics that take place in this life, both individually and corporately. For example, “You want something and do not have it, so you commit murder” explains what happened when the Europeans came to this new land and killed off millions of indigenous people in order to obtain the rights to this land under the aegis of what became known as Manifest Destiny. Those first nation peoples who survived this onslaught eventually were placed on reservations—approximately 300 of them that exist to this very day under the management of the Department of Interior. Even now, we want more oil for our daily use, so we build pipelines that traverse these reservations, threatening the lives of those who already have suffered so much at the hands of those who covet what they think they need in order to maintain their luxurious and convenient lifestyles.

The same dynamic holds true for the capture and transport of African people to this country in order to secure slaves that would provide cheap labor for the plantation owners in harvesting their lucrative crops. The number of African people who were killed in Africa as well as on route across the Atlantic Ocean is estimated to be in the millions—all for the sake of ensuring that these European landowners could profit from their agricultural and industrial endeavors. For those of you who recently have read and discussed Michelle Alexander’s book, “The New Jim Crow,” you know that the want for cheap labor continues to drive the incarceration of a disproportionate number of African-American people in this country that has led to a whole new lucrative industry focused on the construction and management of prisons throughout our land.

Is it any wonder that two of God’s ten core commandments deal with this issue of covetousness that is rooted in our human propensity to want more than what we actually need to be sufficiently sustained in this life? That is why the ELCA has adopted the social statement, “A Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All”—a document that I like to mention once-in-a-while just to remind us that 19 years ago our church wrestled with the growing economic disparity in this country and adopted this social statement on economic life that has some pretty radical implications for our daily lives. In the prologue of this statement, we read that “in Jesus Christ, God’s reign intersects earthly life, transforming us and how we view the systems of this world. Our faith in God provides a vantage point for critiquing any and every system of this world, all of which fall short of what God intends. Human impoverishment, excessive accumulation and consumerism driven by greed, gross economic disparities, and the degradation of nature are incompatible with this reign of God.”

Here are just a few of the many commitments in this document that address the very issue that is described in our lesson from James for today, in no particular order. We, the members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—with an emphasis on the Evangelical—make a commitment:

* To give more to relieve poverty and advocate more for initiatives to reduce poverty;
* To call for public policies that ensure adequate social security, unemployment insurance, and healthcare for all people;
* To advocate for public and private policies that effectively address the causes of poverty;
* To call for our government to provide adequate income assistance and related services for citizens, immigrants, and refugees who are unable to provide sufficient livelihood for themselves;
* To correct any regressive tax systems that place an unfair burden on those who already are impoverished;
* To examine how we are in bondage to our possessions, and how we can be freed up to be more faithful stewards of what we own;
* To advocate for corporate policies that lessen the disparities between compensations of top corporate executives and that of workers throughout an organization;
* To scrutinize the tax breaks, subsidies, and incentives many companies receive in order to ensure that they serve the common good of all;
* To end subsidies for economic activities that use up non-renewable natural resources; and
* To integrate social values into our investment decisions, and invest more in socially responsible companies and funds that sustain businesses as well as workers, consumers, the environment, and low-income communities.

As many of you know, Martin Luther was not a big fan of this Book of James because it concentrates too much on what he called “works righteousness,” and fails to emphasize that we all are saved by God’s grace alone. Well, what is perceived as grace by one person, may not be considered grace by another person. For example, a good news message that may come across as an infringement on my rights about how I earn, save, invest, and spend my money may be the music of freedom to the ears of those who are impoverished and don’t have the means or feel the power to change the system that keeps them in bondage. James makes it very clear that there is a direct correlation between our trust in God and how we use the resources that we have been given for the liberation of those who suffer the most at the hands of those who have to have more and more in order to satisfy their own pleasures.

To counter these temptations of our humanity, James suggests that we open ourselves up to the wisdom of God and behave in a way that is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. Jesus corroborates this suggestion in our gospel lesson for today by telling his disciples that the mark of greatness is the desire and willingness to be a servant of all—not just of some for our own benefit, but of all. It’s not enough that I care about my own child, but also that I have the same care and consideration for the child who has to sleep in the family car at night, the child who goes to bed hungry every night, the child who is shuttled from one foster home to another, or the child who is separated from its family at the border.

As followers of Jesus, our concern ought not be about who is the greatest among us, but rather about who is going to be a servant of all as Jesus gave witness by going to Jerusalem and challenging the oppressive, corrupt, violent, and hypocritical ways of those in authority and power and paying the price for his inclusive, impartial, and compassionate love for all people. To be honest, none of us can ever be perfect in this regard. That is one reason why Jesus was so adamant about offering to us the gift of God’s forgiveness—a gift that became so apparent as Jesus prayed on the cross, “God, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.”

What Jesus’ disciples did not understand until he was raised by God from the dead is that the more that we hang around Jesus and the more that we hang with Jesus, his Spirit is going to rub off on us and is going get into our souls so that our lives will become more pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. These are some of the attributes of greatness to which we all are called by Jesus in our baptism aspire. As James states, these are some of the attributes that will produce a harvest of right relationships that are sown in peace for those who want to make peace in this world.

In a world, and especially in a country, that is plagued by so much oppression, corruption, violence, and hypocrisy, we need all the help that we can get to be able to live in this society without becoming a part of it. That is one reason why we all are invited to share in this holy meal today. Here we all have another opportunity to hang with Jesus and to welcome Jesus’ Spirit once again into our souls. All that we have to do is come to this table, eat and drink, and receive God’s gracious gift of forgiveness, and we will be set free for another week to live our lives in service to God by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.