

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON

September 20, 2009

“EVIL COMES FROM WITHIN US”

James 3:16-4:3

8:45 A.M. SERVICE

What is the source of the conflicts and disputes that tear apart the human community? The blame belongs to the sin of inordinate ambition. The burning desire to have the best of everything is what divides people from one another.

Jesus must have gotten discouraged. As long as the disciples had been with him, they still did not understand the kind of mission he was on, and still thought he was destined to be a political and military leader. But Jesus kept drumming into them the lesson that the kingdom of God is about peace and self-giving service.

Every image of success looks shoddy and fragile when placed alongside Christ. He ruined all of the phony success stories forever when he refused the life of a prince and accepted the death of a pauper. In a deathless way, he showed us the incredible power of self-giving love. The gift of his Spirit empowers each of us to be peace-makers.

In the beginning Tolstoy intended to call his novel *All's Well that Ends Well*. A year or so later as he continued to write what would become one of the greatest achievements in literature; he decided to call it *War and Peace*. Set during the Napoleonic Wars, the massive novel contains over five hundred characters representing every social class. Needless to say, Tolstoy did not invent war or peace. The human species has been making war and seeking peace since the dawn of history. The authors of both war and peace live within us.

The New Testament book of James is miniscule compared to Tolstoy's great novel. Its physical size, however, is misleading. It is of monumental importance as an expression of practical faith. James is a manual of applied Christianity. It insists that the only faith that matters is a living, active faith. The life that truly honors Christ is the one committed to Christ's own concerns, which focuses on human need. James insists that "**hearers**" of the word of God must also be "**doers**" of the word, that faith must be expressed in good works.

Martin Luther was among those who disparaged the little book of James with the claim that it teaches salvation by works, rather than salvation by grace through faith. Such criticism is well-intentioned. Religious legalism is the religion of the scribes and Pharisees and not an accurate representation of the gospel. We do not earn salvation by the good works we do. Rather, salvation is a gracious gift to the undeserving sinner. But there is something wrong when grace changes nothing about a person's life. Faith without works, says James, is dead.

James does not propose a merely external religion, consisting of things we do to earn God's favor. He understands that what is in the heart determines whether a person's deeds are good or evil. In fact, he claims that both war and peace have their beginnings in the human heart. We are the authors of war and peace.

The tongue is mentioned more often in James than any subject except poverty and wealth. James says "***the tongue is a fire. . . . How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!***" He says the tongue is "***set on fire by hell,***" and "***is full of deadly poison.***" He builds a solid case to back up his strong language. Words can hurt or heal. Evil originates in the human heart, and almost every evil one can name relies on words. The problem is not literally our tongues or our words, but our hearts. Even Jesus taught that what comes out of a person is what defiles the person. It is from within, said Jesus, it is from the heart that evil things come. **(Mk 7:20-23)** We have all experienced the destructive power of false words, some of us more than others. We do well to remember the words from Shakespeare's *Othello*: "**Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing; / 'twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands; / But he that filches from me**

my good name / Robs me of that which not enriches him, / And makes me poor indeed.”

Even wars begin within us. *“What causes wars,”* asks James, *“and what causes fightings among you?”* The answer is the heart. It would be nice if we could blame war on something or someone far removed from us. Circumstances cause wars. Dictators start wars. Wars are triggered by international disputes, social upheavals, and ideological conflicts. But back of all such factors is that little flame, the tongue, putting into words the vengeful, selfish passions of the heart. Look at how many people have had to apologize recently for their words!

The bottom line on our humanity is that each of us has both war-making and peace-making potential, often simultaneously. John Bunyan, in the *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, wrote of his character Talkative, **“He was a saint abroad and a devil at home.”** It is not unheard of for individuals to sing or speak with great piety on Sunday and curse their workers on Monday. Neither is it unknown for people to speak with sweet graciousness in public and murder someone with malicious gossip in private. We are as ambiguous as most drugs, which are both poisons and cures.

Why do we allow ourselves to be a part of something that can be so destructive to another person? Deep in our human nature is the desire to elevate ourselves, to be important, or at least to appear to be important to others. In seeking to fulfill this desire we can take the high road or the low road. The high road involves working to make something of ourselves, lifting ourselves to our true potential. The low road involves trying to lift ourselves by pushing down those around us. Critical comments are common on the low road. It is also interesting how we are quickest to point out weaknesses in others that exist in us. You can almost learn people’s secrets by listening to what they say about someone else.

James has some wise counsel for all of us. It is further evidence that the good works for which he argues are the fruit of a redeemed heart. James says that God *“yearns jealously over the spirit he has put in us.”* (4:5) Therefore, he says, *“resist the devil and he will flee from you.”* Evil only has as much power over us as we allow it to have. *“Submit yourselves to God,”* says James. *“Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.”*

Even with our double-minded nature, we can ***“cleanse our hands”*** and ***“purify our hearts.”***(4:7-8) By accepting the love of God we are transformed. And the authors of war become the authors of peace.

It is clear that where jealousy, selfishness, and inordinate ambition prevail there will be disorder and human suffering. The devil does not make us do evil. Our actions spring from within, from pride, self-seeking, and unscrupulous ambition. Every individual is responsible and accountable. But ***“the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”*** (Ps 111:10) We are to choose the wisdom from above, and walk the road that leads to peace, love, and abundant life.

If you are convinced that evil has no power over you, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.