

## **“Contention”** Sermon for Sept 23, 2018

James 3:13-18, 4:1-3, 7-8. Mark 9:33-37

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Mathew 6:24-25

The disciples of Jesus saw the coming kingdom as their own personal possession. Even today, many see the church as our own little village on earth. We forget that our churches are places where people are to be instructed in the Holy Wisdom of God's kingdom. Seeking our own praise is too often substituted for the praise and worship of God.

It was not enough for Jesus to simply chastise them for being in contention. Jesus had to refocus their thinking. As human beings, born into sin, we all have the same needs for recognition, authority, position, and high esteem. James asks:

*4 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?*

What Christ sought to remind them and what he seeks to remind us of through our communion in the Holy Spirit of God, is a refocus of our concept of greatness. As Jesus returned home to Capernaum, he knew the disciples had been in contention among themselves. Imagine how Jesus' heart must have been cut to the core. How many times He had told them about the cross. And here He was about to stand face to face with the cross, while the disciples were arguing over who should be the greatest.

They were not focused on the suffering of Christ, but on their own importance. They were unable to understand that his death also meant that they had to die to their wisdom. They had to die their egos, to their personal aspirations. Their contending egos were to die with Jesus on the cross, if they would join him as servants of God's new realm. Surely the idea of being servants of the kingdom rather than

princes and princesses, kings and queens had never entered their mind. He simply turned and asked, "What were you fighting about along the way?"

The disciples were already gripped with jealousy, envy, ambition, and even rivalry. They missed Jesus' words that He must die and arise again. Apparently, they connected the thought of "rising from the dead" with the setting up of His kingdom and began to argue over the top positions of leadership. They did not yet understand what the kingdom was and the real question is, "Do we?" Is the seed that is even now, being sown in this sermon, taking root in us, or is it already being choked out by the weeds of our personal and groups agendas?

Notice that the disciples kept quiet and said nothing in response to Jesus' question. Their earthly wisdom, their way of thinking and reasoning about reality, had led them to quarrel and divide. It shamed

them. What if every time we had an idea or a proposal, we asked ourselves the question, “Is my motivation for this something that is pleasing to God, or is it a shameful display of my contentious nature or my desire for personal recognition of both?”

Each of us as disciples of Christ, will be called to give an account. Did we listen to God’s word concerning taking up our own cross? Did we allow it to reshape and reform us? Did we use the gifts we have received from God to build his kingdom, or did we act as Satan’s wrecking crew to contend against what God wants in the church and in the world?

James writes that human wisdom, including human ambition is one kind. But it is not God’s kind. In this real life story which illustrates James’ later teaching, Jesus calls us to substitute our goals for those of the divine wisdom that he as the Christ offers to us. May

we heed the Word of God given to the church by Jesus and his earthly brother James so long ago:

7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. We cannot serve God's wisdom and human wisdom. Such thinking only leads to contention. May we yet hear, heed and live free of contention. In the name of the Father, Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.