

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Yesterday, I got into a fight with 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9. The odds were against me!

Like that groaner, all of us know what it's like to have been in a fight, from time to time. Sometimes those fights are with others; sometimes they're with a recognized group or organization, and sometimes they're with ourselves. Sometimes, they're over fast; sometimes, they may linger for a week or a month; and sometimes, they're prolonged and may even still be on-going! I'm sure all of us would like to be conflict-free and able to reconcile differences when they arise in healthy and respectful ways. I'm sure all of us want to see the peace that's a sign of the Kingdom of God having-come-near, realized in our world today. But in order for that to happen, we have to find out what's causing the fighting and discord, to begin with.

If we listen to the message of our second reading, we'll discover ---as James did--- that all of our conflicts, disputes, and fighting have one thing in common: He says, in chapter 4 verse 1, "Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?" ---A very wise reflection from James, as he tried to pinpoint the source of the in-fighting that he may have observed or heard about, among the early Christian communities, to whom his letter was circulated. He's not the only one, though, who identified cravings at war within ourselves as the source of what's wrong with our world and with our personal lives. Siddhartha Gautama, also known as the Buddha, recognized the same thing in the 6th century, BC, when he formulated the four noble truths, in which the second of the truths states that the cause of all suffering/ injustice/ pain/ sorrow/ and lament is our craving.

Before we go any further, though we need to make a distinction between the two types of cravings that we may experience: The first kind is NOT the kind we're concerned with today. These are the cravings we have for greater justice or peace in the world, the cravings we have to help the poor and the afflicted, the craving to love the unloved or to ministers to those who are abandoned and left to their own resources. Such cravings aren't at war within us because they're placed there by God, in order to make us, more and more, into the persons whom God has envisioned us to be!

No, the kind of cravings we're talking about today are those that result in a clinginess or an inordinate attachment to someone or something--- those that can, in fact, be detrimental in some way. For example, maybe we've had a craving for a particular food in the middle of the night and raided the fridge to satisfy our longing, only to end up eating too much of it, that we wined up upsetting our stomachs and unable to go back to sleep, in the process.

Or maybe we've had a craving to get closer to a particular person to whom we were attracted and were willing to do whatever it took to get their attention or to have them reciprocate our feelings. Or maybe instead, it was someone whom we wanted to date, but who didn't give us the time of day, or someone who had originally reciprocated an interest in a relationship but ended it because we became too attached, too quickly and scared them off.

Maybe we've had a craving to advance in our career and were willing to do whatever it took to reach our desired position, even if it meant talking badly about our co-workers or sucking up to our employer.

Or maybe we've had a craving to make exorbitant amounts of money, so as to never have to worry about how we're going to make ends meet again, and were willing to do whatever was necessary to satisfy that desire.

The cause of all these cravings is a lack of being satisfied with what we already have. It's a failure to appreciate the blessings we've already received! It's a desire to control our lives, our destiny, or our future. It's a refusal to respect the boundaries to our own and another person's well-being, too.

In spiritual matters, it's a failure to accept who we are in Christ! It's not fully and consistently identifying with Jesus' life and not fully sharing in his mission. It's failing or refusing to unite our sufferings with the sufferings of Christ on the cross and failing to see their redemptive value! It's not believing that we're of any worth or value apart from other persons or things.

When these cravings persist, our conflicts and fighting will continue because we haven't yet fully accepted that God is to found in all things and in every place and in every person! Our cravings will persist because we refuse to give up control and to be the servant of one another, but rather, seek to be the greatest, and to have the best place, and to have the most esteem, and the greatest power, as we see portrayed in our Gospel story today!

St. James rightly identifies such cravings as deleterious to the life of the Christian. He goes on to identify “envy and selfish ambition” as primary sources of our conflict as well. They’re indicative of a false notion that ‘things’ or ‘persons-being-treated-as-things-to-be-possessed’ will bring us lasting happiness. They’re indicative too, of a hedonistic mentality in which we falsely believe that a pursuit of pleasure above all things will satisfy our heart’s desires. Quite the contrary, St. James asserts that such cravings can only be conquered when we seek, with the help of God’s grace, to replace them with the values and virtues which reflect our true inner nature, as persons made in the image and likeness of God, namely, the qualities of purity, peacefulness, gentleness, meekness, mercy, impartiality, and sincerity.

To reflect such values and qualities and to see them lived out in our day-to-day interactions though, requires daily meditation on the life and parables of Jesus, on our part. It requires sitting with the Word of God in silence and letting the Holy Spirit change our attitudes, mindsets, and perceptions of others, one day at a time. It challenges us to embrace God’s life-giving law and to rejoice in the ways it can help us to be the persons whom God intends us to be. It involves journaling about where we may need to make changes in our daily living and brainstorming ways to make the changes happen. Such meditation invites us to become unattached to our preconceptions of persons, life and world events, and our notion of God, in the grand scheme of things. It requires a spirit of gratitude too, for all that God has already given us and a commitment to never take God’s blessings for granted. It requires a deep-seated trust that God is good and that God has a plan for our lives, even if we may not know what it is, at times. It requires seeing all relationships as mutually reciprocating and a resolve to work on or to end any relationships which are one-sided, clingy, or volatile. Such meditation too, requires courage to see God-given suffering and sacrifice as the means by which we can potentially grow to be more like Christ whose own suffering and sacrifice of his life on the cross brought about resurrection and new life for all who believe. When we meditate in this way and do the things that meditation brings to light by God’s grace, we’ll find the means and the mindset to live in purity, peacefulness, gentleness, meekness, mercy, impartiality, and sincerity, and thus, put an end to the destructive cravings that wage war within us.