

**Sermon for October 25, 2015 (Proper 25 amended, Year B)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: James 3:13-4:8a (CEB); Psalm 34:1-8; Mark 10:46-52

Title: What of the wisdom from above?

My dear friends: why is it so difficult for human beings to live and work together in harmony?

Years ago, it is said that a United States Navy ship was patrolling the South Pacific when smoke was spotted on the horizon in an area without any known inhabited islands.

When the sailors went ashore to investigate, they could see that the smoke was rising out of one of three small huts which were built together on the tiny island.

They also discovered one solitary American sailor who had been shipwrecked on the island years earlier and had somehow managed to survive there all alone.

When the crew came ashore, the survivor was ecstatic. "Praise God that you finally found me! I've been living all alone on this island for more than 5 years!"

The Petty Officer replied, "If you're all alone, why do you have three different huts here?"

The survivor answered, "Yes, well, you see, I live in one and I go to church in another." "Alright. But what about the third hut over there?" the sailor wondered. And the man answered, "Oh, that? That's where I used to go to church!"

My friends: God created us for community.

It is the foolishness of human sin which breaks this apart and destroys community – even when we are all alone!

How does this happen? How did James diagnose this?

"What is the source of conflict among you? What is the source of your disputes? Don't they come from your cravings that are at war in your own lives?" (James 4:1).

Can you even imagine life on planet earth without a continuous series of conflicts and disputes between people? One would hope – or perhaps even expect! – things

to be different within the Church, among those people called to love God and to love one another.

But it is not so.

Experts estimate that there are about 43,000 distinct Christian denominations in the world today. And they estimate that a new Christian denomination is created every 10 hours somewhere on planet earth.

Do you know WHY there are so many different groups of disciples that refuse to work together?

It's called PRIDE. James called it "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition."

My friends: I want to suggest to you this morning that ruptures in community are created and maintained by fictional stories – by narratives divorced from truth - which we human beings love to tell ourselves over and over again.

A perfect example is offered up by the recent news of violence between Israelis and Palestinians.

It seems clear that the current conflict in Israel and Palestine revolves around the radical discrepancy between two very different stories told about the Temple Mount.

Among Palestinians, the fictional myth that is repeated widely and is generally accepted is that the Jewish Temple was never actually located on the Temple Mount, which Muslims call the Haram Al-Sharif, the Noble Sanctuary, the third most sacred site in Islam.

Mahmoud Abbas, the current Palestinian Authority president, recently explained to a raucous Palestinian crowd that "every drop of [Muslim] blood" being spilled now in Jerusalem belongs to holy martyrs who are protecting the Noble Sanctuary from desecration by Jews (and I quote) who "have no right to desecrate the mosque with their dirty feet" (<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/the-roots-of-the-palestinian-uprising-against-israel/410944/>).

Just a few years ago, the recognized Muslim authority in Jerusalem stated that “There was never a Jewish temple on Al-Aqsa [at the Temple Mount] and there is no proof that there was ever a temple.”

(The former mufti of Jerusalem, Ikrema Sabri, see the article by Mike Seid, “Western Wall was never part of temple,” Jerusalem Post, October 25, 2007).

But the sad fact is that there is NO proof of the Temple’s existence on the Temple Mount because the Palestinian authorities refuse to allow any archeological work to take place there!

No one is allowed to look for proof, because they don’t want any proof to be found.

On the other side, Israelis are quite clear that all of Jerusalem is their holy place. Even Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, AFTER receiving a Nobel Peace Prize for his negotiated agreements with the PLO, stated it in this way: “Jerusalem was ours, will be ours, is ours and will remain as such forever” (Jerusalem Day Address to Knesset, May 29, 1995).

Just listen to these words:

“It’s ours.” “It belongs to us.” “They don’t belong here.”

What is it that James wrote?

“Wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and everything that is evil” (James 3:16). And later on: “You long for something you don’t have, so you commit murder. You are jealous for something you can’t get, so you struggle and fight” (James 4:2).

James is writing to the teachers and leaders of local communities of messianic Jews – faithful, observant Jews who follow Jesus as their Rabbi – the one who faithfully interprets the Torah for them – and who is also the long-promised Messiah of God.

It is very doubtful that there were actually murders taking place in these communities.

It is far more likely that this language about murder is hyperbole, but it does faithfully display why leaders need to be so incredibly careful with the language that they use.

Because false narratives based on fear and ambition and greed always – always! – lead to violence and death.

Please hear me: I have no dog in this fight between Israelis and Palestinians. They are all beloved children of God who have valid claims to live in that land in peace.

But real peace is built upon the foundation of humility and truth.

By constantly telling these false myths which reinforce divisions into the familiar camps of “us” and “them”, with each side solidly convinced of the rightness of their claim and the falseness of the other’s, peace is impossible.

It is the foolishness of human sin which destroys community. Last week, we heard James speak about the tongue as “a fire” with destructive potential.

This unrelenting conflict in the Holy Land is a perfect example.

But... change the story which people tell themselves and then peace is possible.

You can apply this to every area of conflict between human beings and you can see that the same dynamics are always at work.

Conflict within your marriage? I’ll bet that you’ve been repeating a story to yourself that goes something like this:

“Oh, she is doing that because she thinks x,y or z.”

“He doesn’t understand me, that’s why he keeps on acting this way.”

Are there conflicts in our national politics? You know how these stories go.

“Oh, they are just a bunch of backward, redneck bigots.”

Or “They want to take away our guns and our rights. They don’t believe in America; they want to give everything away to people who refuse to work.”

On and on the stories go. Why? Because conflict lives and feeds off of these fictional stories which we tell ourselves over and over again in our minds.

So what does God want us to do?

Question the narratives! Doubt the stories that you keep telling yourself!

They are not the truth of God.

If you are stuck in a recurring conflict and there is anger or bitterness in your heart toward another person, it is because of the story that keeps on repeating itself in your head! And you have the power to turn it off!

Do you know what the great John Chrysostom said about speaking of your enemies? Listen to this and just imagine if this behavior was normative in Washington, DC.

Chrysostom said: "Never refer to an enemy using scandalous names, but use [only] respectful ones; on hearing this, your soul will learn from the tongue, become accustomed and undergo a change of heart."

Never refer to an enemy using scandalous names, but only respectful ones. To denigrate others, to tell false stories about them – this is friendship with the world, it is simple human wisdom, because this is the normal way that humans operate.

But what of the wisdom from above?

What are the characteristics of a life that is shaped by the wisdom of God?

Listen to this list!

"First, it is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine" (James 3:17).

Does not that make your heart burn with longing to actually see people live by THIS kind of wisdom? Wouldn't you love to see this?

It is possible, and it happens when ordinary people like you and me allow God to change our story.

It happens when we finally let go of the old stories which we repeat in our minds about ourselves, about our enemies, about those who anger us.

Real change happens when we accept and embrace God's story of who we are: free, complete, whole, safe, loved, cherished...right now.

Embrace this reality. Then you will know, and be able to share, the true peace of God. Amen.