

## **What Are You Arguing About?**

A prompting offered by the Rev. Roselin Runnels  
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Dayton, Ohio

### **James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a**

*Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.*

*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. And 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 pleasures.*

*Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*

### **Mark 9:30-37**

*They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.*

*Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."*

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Since the title of this sermon is a question, let's begin with some questions this morning. I'm going to ask for a show of hands on each question. However, I will not ask questions that are intrusive or embarrassing. First question: If you have a sibling or siblings, would you raise your hand? Did you ever argue with your siblings? Do you have more than one child? Do they ever argue? If you have one child, do you ever argue with her or him? Do you have a spouse, a partner, or someone you love and see regularly? Do you ever argue? I see. That's quite a hefty load of arguing going on! It's also pretty normal.

I have a sister who is 14 months older than I. Now I, of course, am pretty easy going. I have my moments, just like everyone else, but I think I am easy to get along with. I don't enjoy conflict and frankly prefer to avoid it. She, on the other hand, is strong-willed and tenacious. One might even say she is bossy and controlling. I have heard the family stories of how, when I began to explore the skill of sitting upright, she would push me back into a prone position, saying, "Die down, die down!" After all, she had never seen me in other than a reclining position, except for those times when someone

held me in a sitting position. I have no knowledge of a life of which she is not a part. I also have no knowledge of a life in which she isn't directing or ordering or telling or strongly suggesting.

It shouldn't surprise you when I say that I remember hearing these words from either of both of our parents: What are you arguing about? Now I need another show of hands: Have you ever heard that? Have you ever said that? What are you arguing about?

A dictionary will tell us that arguing ranges from debate based in reasoning to bickering which connotes sharp, persistent, bad-tempered exchange. Lately I have heard far more bickering than debate. Most of the time when we hear as children or ask as parents "What are you arguing about?" what we mean is "Please stop bickering. Please stop this self-serving, me-first, I-want-all-the-power, mean-spirited, pointless, headed to no resolution, accusatory "nyah-nyah". Let me go through the list again: me first, I want all the power, mean-spirited, pointless, headed to no resolution, accusatory.

Let's have another show of hands: Have you heard any of this lately? With this in mind, let's turn to the gospel lesson.

You have heard enough sound and excellent preaching from this pulpit over the years to know that the writer of the gospel of Mark consistently describes the disciples as "not getting it", as not understanding Jesus and his ministry. Here it is again: They did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

I am inclined to be sympathetic to the disciples. They *don't* get it. Sometimes I don't get it, sometimes we don't get it. With my 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, the story sounds something like this: The leader of my group is getting paranoid and secretive. He is giving himself titles, talking about people wanting to kill him. He's scaring me, but I am afraid to ask him about this.

When someone is in a different place emotionally, a painful place spiritually, a hard spot morally, it is not that hard to turn away from her. It's tough to hear about, it's hard to see. Mostly the pain is too great, the heart is too hurt, and we turn our attention elsewhere.

Perhaps nothing invites us into self-absorption more than another's agony. There is the very real and initial tendency to exhale deeply and say, "Thank God, that's not happening to me. Thank God I don't have *that* problem." The next step is to focus on our own desires and move in the direction of getting those taken care of.

The disciples give in to their fear of asking Jesus what is going on and turn instead to their own concerns: If the leader is losing it, who will take his place? In other words, who is greatest among us? The story seems to imply that Jesus was aware of the argumentation between the disciples as they passed through Galilee. The story says that when they were in the house, Jesus asked them what they were arguing about on the way. On the way: the journey through Galilee had not been a 10 minute walk. Jesus and the disciples had been on the way for a while. The story implies that this argument had been going on for the entire journey. The disciples "are silent". How are they to tell their leader, "Well, you're pretty paranoid and, frankly, we think maybe you are losing it and someone will have to take over." Instead the disciples are silent.

The question "What are you arguing about?" seems to be a real conversation stopper in this case. Most of the time though it isn't. Many times the arguing parties simply bombard the questioner with more and more of their argument!

I am almost afraid to ask if you are tired, if you are bone-weary of the arguing but I am afraid it might unleash a tirade against the arguing!

What I do want to ask is what **are you bickering about?** What are you arguing about? More specifically where is your focus? Is it on serving without regard to recognition? Is it on welcome?

The reading from James helps us to understand better the brief exchange between Jesus and the disciples in Mark. Don't be put off by James' choice of words like devilish and devil. These words point to something that we many of us are both put off by and confused by: James' words point to sin.

Preachers, well, let me qualify that, some preachers today don't have much to say about sin. Those who do say much about sin leave us in a deep hole with no hope. They place in a position of such abject sinfulness that we respond with a sort of frozenness, a sort of paralytic state.

When I was younger I was warned against sin and I thought that I probably shouldn't sin. But I wasn't exactly sure what sin was. Was it smoking? Was it drinking? Was it having sex? Was it lying? Was it disobedience? What was it? It is easy to make sin a visible act. As I got a little older I was introduced to sin as something to avoid because sinning kept you out of heaven and getting to heaven was the whole point. Sin went from not smoking, lying, cheating, stealing, etc. to some indefinable "thing" that could keep me out of heaven. Finally I was introduced to a much more helpful though admittedly ambiguous notion of sin. It was this: sin is whatever separates me from love of God and love of neighbor.

Do you know Teresa of Avila? Those of you who come from a Catholic tradition and those of us who wander widely spiritually may know her. Teresa's grandparents were Jews who converted during the Inquisition and were known as "conversos". During Teresa's time the Carmelite order had something of the flare of a "parlor" society for women. The Crusades had decimated the male population and husbands were few. Women entered the order as one of many choices and the order became more like a sorority for the privileged than a choice to serve God. Teresa is disgusted by this, by the lack of economic parity within the Carmelites so she and 4 of her sisters start a new order. She is deeply contemplative, she is the granddaughter of Jews, Mary Magdalene is her exemplar and she is considered "questionable" by the Inquisition.

It is Teresa of Avila who said "We cannot know whether we love God, although there may be strong reason for thinking so; but there can be no doubt about whether we love our neighbor or not."

Does our arguing separate us from love of God and love of neighbor? Is our arguing simply shifting the focus away from what we fear? Is arguing a way to avoid the risk of loving and caring and serving? James tells us that the conflicts and disputes among us come from cravings that are at war within us. We want something, we covet something and we separate ourselves from love of God and love of neighbor to get it.

We may want universal health care in this country but we may be at war within about giving up what we have. We may want fairness but we may fear what it will do to us economically. We may accept that poverty is an unaddressed social and moral problem that is creating chasm-like inequities but find our responses to possible solutions to be self-protective and anxious. We may want to welcome the stranger for we were once strangers in a strange land but we are overcome with fear about being taken advantage of. We may want to stop arguing but believe so deeply in the rightness of our cause that we cannot stop. . . . Need I go on?

I do not for one moment suggest that we cease to debate from a reasoned position. I do not for one moment suggest that we back away from the fight for justice on the many levels in which we are engaged.

I do, however, suggest that we, all of us in every arena of our lives, ask ourselves whenever we argue "what am I arguing about?" Does my arguing separate me from love of God and love of neighbor or does my arguing bring me closer to love of God and love of neighbor?

What are you arguing about? "We cannot know whether we love God, although there may be strong reason for thinking so; but there can be no doubt about whether we love our neighbor or not."