

**Brothers and Sisters, Grace to you and peace, from God our Father
and from our Lord and Saviors Jesus Christ... Amen**

Our three scripture readings this morning have a definite theme... They all reference interpersonal violence... Perhaps the epistle of James is the most insightful.

He writes, "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." I think these two verses are some of the most concise statements of human nature and the human condition in the entire bible. And I'd like to reflect with these verses for a while.

Interpersonal violence happens in all sorts of ways. Recently we talked about jealousy, name calling and bearing false witness... And there are many others as well. For instance, there is also adultery, stealing and coveting. Coveting is simply wanting what someone else has.

The Ten Commandments are very clear about coveting; in fact, we have two commandments expressly dealing with coveting, nine and ten. And you could make the argument that nearly all the commandments have some foundation in coveting.

Coveting leads to all sorts of jealousy, rivalry, accusation, finger pointing... All kinds of interpersonal violence... We used to say that money was the root of all evil, I wonder if it's coveting.

My favorite scholar says that we learn to desire through the eyes of the other. We learn to covet by imitating others. If you have two children and one toy, eventually the two children will be fighting over it... Have you seen this? We imitate each other's wants and desires.

A quick story... This past weekend Kris and I went on a little motorcycle trip with my daughter in laws parents. They used to live in Hastings, but they moved to southern Illinois about five years ago. We've become pretty good friends... We rode south along the river; they rode north and met together half way between in Guttenberg Iowa. It was a beautiful day for a ride...

One of the reasons for the trip was that Scott got a new motorcycle. He got brand new Indian road master--blue, with all the options. It was beautiful! And everywhere we went you could see people turning their heads to look at it. As we were parked near a sidewalk in Guttenberg, I watched group and after group of people, stop and look at it...

You could almost see the wheels of envy turning. I have to admit my mind was spinning a little too. I thought, “Boy, I’d love to have a motorcycle like that.” For the whole next day all I could think about was all that chrome and all that “coolness.”

I was later reflecting on that experience and I wondered-- was I caught up in the desire of all the other gawkers? I think I was! That covetous stuff is powerful!

Possessions are objects of desire that command our attention; and these objects of desire bombard us from all directions and enslave us. We are either in bondage to the stuff we possess; or we are possessed by the desire to obtain stuff. Either way, possessions are a stumbling block to our spiritual freedom.

I was aware of my own feelings about wanting a cool motorcycle, I knew I was getting reeled in a little bit and so I just observed it and thought to myself, you don’t need to play that game... And for the most part I was able to let it go. And mostly for practical reasons-- I can’t afford one, and even if I could it would get ruined on our gravel roads... So, sometimes we just have to admit we can’t have everything we want! And that’s life, right?

Well, the first evening we went out for supper and Scott received a text message from a co-worker of his saying that he had just purchased a guitar, a Gibson Les Paul Custom at a garage sale for fifty bucks! He even sent along pictures... Now, you have to understand, I like motorcycles, but I love guitars! This sent me a little over the edge...

First of all, I’m jealous as all get out. That guitar is worth four to five thousand dollars! At the time I joked that I’d give him five hundred so he could make a little profit. I wondered if this guy knew what he fell into. And then I started thinking about this situation and it raised all sorts of hypothetical issues for me.

Knowing what I know about Gibson Les Paul Customs, could I live with myself if I bought one at a garage sale for 50 bucks knowing it’s worth five thousand?

My coveting was running straight into the seventh commandment, you shall not steal. When Luther talks about stealing in the small catechism, he says we are not to cheat people by “crooked deals to obtain things for ourselves, but instead help them to improve and protect their property and income.” Luther expands stealing into knowingly taking advantage of others. In other words, this taking advantage is an interpersonal violence.

Sometimes this coveting problem is a practical black and white issue, most of the time it intrudes our lives in little bits, and all the time.

It's an ethical issue. So, could I live with myself if I bought that guitar at a garage sale for 50 bucks knowing it's worth five thousand? The coveting part of me says go ahead it's your lucky day! The seventh commandment part of me says I should tell the people what it's really worth.

Now, to be honest, I don't know what I would do. I'd like to think I would do the righteous thing, but to be truthful, I'm not sure... What would you do? Covetousness is a powerful thing; it can tie us up in all sorts of dilemmas and problems.

Jesus asks the disciples what they had been arguing about. And true to form, they had been arguing about who was the greatest. They were all coveting the top spot. Isn't that just what we humans do: desire to be the greatest, crave to be the most powerful, long to be the most influential or most wealthy. Covetousness leads to murderous hearts.

Those words from the epistle of James keep ringing in my ear. "You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder." And so it goes for us human beings, constantly, endlessly in conflict and disagreement.

Over many years of doing bible studies, once in a while I'll have someone ask me the question, "Why did Jesus have to die to forgive us our sins, couldn't he just say your sins are forgiven?" Well, Jesus died *exactly* to our murderous tendencies, *exactly* so we can see ourselves in a mirror...

God was creating a way for us to see how our covetous hearts lead us into conflict and violence. And when we see Jesus' blood on our own very human hands, it gives us pause to stop and reflect. It's about seeing how I contribute to the systematic destruction of others. It's about repentance, turning around and going in a different direction.

Jesus knows we are covetous creatures, and Jesus didn't come so that we might stop desiring, but so that "what" we desire might be transformed. In other words, instead of letting our wants and desires lead us into paths of interpersonal violence, our desires might be to imitate Jesus; in other words-- to be rich toward God and desiring to love the neighbor. This is the transformation of our wants and desires, the transformation of our hearts.

The disciples are arguing with one another about who is the greatest, and Jesus picks up a child and holds it among them. And says, "whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me." Can you picture this grouping of people?

I like to think of them standing in a circle, and it is the child, that is at the center of the Kingdom. It's not about who is the greatest, who gets to sit where in the Kingdom of God-- it's about welcome, inclusion and love.

The Kingdom of Humanity is good at coveting, jealousy, conflict and violence. Whereas the Kingdom of God is about desiring love, imitating Christ, belonging, inclusion, love, mercy and forgiveness. Can you see the difference? This is all about a completely different way of being in the world.

And the good news today is that this is God's work and God's intention. Jesus came to lead us out of our murderous ways... Hear again these words from the epistle of James "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."

We are all saints and sinners... We are all forgiven... We are all loved and cherished... God is working miracles in our hearts every single day. Like that little child, all of us, each of us is held in the embrace of Jesus. God has welcomed all of us to a new kind of kingdom.

And as God has welcomed us, we in turn reach out to welcome others. We welcome children... Those who are hungry... Those who are poor... Those who are different, Democrats and Republicans, because in God's eyes, All Are Welcome...

Amen.