

Today marks the fourth of five Sundays that we've been reading from the Epistle of James. Even though we have one more week, today's passage is something of a culmination – where the last three weeks come together. To refresh your memory, James begins by instructing his congregation to “be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger.” He then addresses a problematic trend within the body; perhaps you will remember James' strong words from our Epistle of two weeks ago: “Have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ...[Y]ou have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you?” In that passage James scolds his people for preferring, favoring, honoring the rich but not the poor. And last week we were reminded of the power of words and how they are often used to destroy – even in Christian community. (I would even go so far as to say, *especially* in the Christian community.)

James' letter is particularly important for us who are kind of “established” in the Church because it is the epistle for those who are already in. Paul, in his epistles, is often concerned with making the case for Christ – getting the Good News shared *beyond* the established community, and out into the world. James is writing to the convinced – the people already committed to Christ: After we come to Christ, after the conversion, how then should we live?

But, let's face it. The first question for us may well be, what about conversion? Converted to what? Converted *from* what? Converted *for* what? This is a much easier question for those who attend, say, a Pentecostal church. Being “saved” is a pretty important part of their message. They can tell you, being saved means being saved *from* something. Always Hell, but usually other things as well. How then we should live, in such communities, is usually answered in negatives – no drugs, no promiscuous sex, no smoking, no celebrating Halloween. Evangelical conversion is confusing when you grow up in a church like that and don't have a dramatic tale of “saved from.”

But we in the Episcopal Church tend to come to understand conversion differently. We see it as an on-going process. As James knows, though, even the converted need to be converted. It is our “cravings,” as he puts it: all of us need to be continually converted in our cravings.

James' community was plagued by the same cravings that plague many people, church people included, still today. "You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and you cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts." The craving for stuff and the things we will do to fulfill our cravings. Maybe we all need to be "saved."

There are some more obvious examples of destructive cravings that might come to mind when we hear James' words: when a teen kills another teen for a pair of shoes or when a jealous lover kills a spouse. But I doubt James is addressing literal murder within the church family; if members of his congregation are literally killing each other, he should probably lead with that not bury it in chapter four.

I remember watching a documentary once about the 2008 financial crisis. If you need an example of "You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder," watch this program. There are no guns or knives, but I'm not sure I have seen more destructive cravings on display than in that film. For those creative and intelligent and willing enough, the money was there for the taking. Folks at investment banks like Goldman Sachs knew that the economy, the housing market was going to collapse on middle- and working-class families but rather than act to prevent a collapse, they bet against their fellow Americans and collected a huge reward. This is nothing new: when the craving for money and power is left unchecked, one will stop at nothing to get it. Sometimes an attempted murder leaves the victim alive but devastated.

That's the grand scale. Most of our cravings do not involve credit default swaps or financial crises. Most just involve cravings and the little compromises we make day after day to fulfill those cravings.

One of the interesting features in today's epistle is the way James relates wisdom and ethics. Often we think of wisdom as being essentially positive. We differentiate between wisdom as virtue and intelligence as amoral – a resource to be used for good or ill. In fact, much of the wisdom literature in the Bible agrees with this perspective – usually contrasting wisdom with folly.

But for James there are two kinds of wisdom: *worldly* wisdom and *godly* wisdom. What Paul does with *love* in his letter to the Corinthians, James does with *wisdom*: defines it by its fruits, ties it to ethics. How then should we live? The wisdom of the world is defined by envy and selfish ambition. You might possess the skills and intelligence to scheme your way to big money or power, but *should* you?

For James godly wisdom is about priorities and relationships. The question is not: How much can I take? But, “Is my gain another’s loss?” Is the cost of this craving a friendship, a relationship with a brother or sister in Christ? “Wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality and hypocrisy.” Coming to Christ is not the end. *After* we come to Christ, how *then* should we live?

For James it started with a community of Christians who showed partiality – favoring the rich, catering to the wealthy, ignoring the poor. What started with admiration, maybe even idolatry, became obsession. James watched as members of the church went from following *Jesus* to chasing the *money*, from treasuring godly *wisdom* to treasuring *treasure*.

Like many things in the Christian life it is both simple and hard. James lays out parameters for godly wisdom: pure, peaceable, gentle, merciful and without hypocrisy. Those are pretty clear measurables. Like a checklist, we can run our plans and actions through the list and come out on the other side with a result: *worldly* or *godly*.

But it is also hard because cravings are natural. They are born in us. We crave food. We crave sex. We crave money and power and control. We crave these things because these cravings, on a primal level, keep us alive. And so in that sense it is understandable that our culture is driven by consumption, rewards our cravings. If one investment bank doesn’t feast on the spoils, another will. Survival of the fittest.

Perhaps godly wisdom is the will to resist those cravings evolution has given us. Quit trying to be the world’s greatest and just follow Jesus.

But don’t think of this as an end to cravings. God *created* us with the desire to crave. Think of it as craving life instead of destruction. In a violent world, crave peace. In an aggressive world, crave gentleness. In a world of selfish ambition, crave relationship. In a world of vengeance, crave mercy. In a world of ambition, crave the cross.

I am not sure godly wisdom will prove very rewarding by most accounts. Godly wisdom demands that we give when everything else is take and take and take. But then again, it is Jesus who says, “What does it profit one to gain the world and lose one’s soul?” Crave money, power, success and in the end that is all you will have. But crave God and your reward is that God is all you will want.