

Busted

“You are not the center.”

James 4:1-4

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Entitlement

Two brothers were squaring off at the breakfast table, fighting over which one would get the first pancake. After a degree of escalation, their mother saw this as an opportune learning moment and intervened saying, “Boys! Stop the fighting. If Jesus were sitting here he would say, ‘let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.’” The quicker brother jumped in first and said, “OK Ryan: *you* be Jesus.”

Why not let someone else be Jesus?

A 1971 Coca Cola ran a commercial that sang:

I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony
I'd like to hold it in my arms and keep it company
I'd like to see the world for once all standing hand in hand
And hear them echo through the hills for peace throughout the land
That's the song I hear, let the world sing today
A song of peace that echoes on and never goes away.¹

I think Coke's advertising company chose this song for a commercial in order to associate the product with the one thing most people long for: peace, harmony, everyone in the world getting along with each other. Ask anyone who somehow has had to face warfare or who's lost a friend because of a feud and you might be quick to conclude that peace and harmony is perhaps our greatest hope; and failure to realize it has to be our biggest grief.

We mark our time by conflicts. I walked through Costco and looked down the aisle where a bunch of music CD's were stacked. Among them was a large collection of boxes that had the title, *Music of World War II*. It could have been *Music from the Golden Era of Jazz*, or *Hits from the Big Band Era*; but they said, *Music of World War II* and just about anyone who looks at the cover will know what they are. What else so influenced the world during the early '40's than the War?

I'm a Baby Boomer, born in '52 and come of age in the 60's and 70's. What distinguishes that period of history more than the war in Vietnam?

Laura's dad told about how he watched a driver traveling down the left lane of the interstate, giving no room for anyone to pass on the right and not changing his speed for someone behind him to go ahead. The car in back had climbed way up on the slower driver's tail, but he never got the hint. Finally, my father-in-law slowed way down so the other driver could get around him and when he did, he jerked his car back in the left lane, close in front of the slower car, and slammed on his breaks. It was nearly a high-speed and costly wreck.

Conflict: it seems we're all carefully taught that ending a conflict, eliminating a threat, or achieving a goal has to be accomplished at the cost of harming someone else.

Gain at another's expense. Do unto others before they do unto you.

Let someone else be Jesus.

I'd like to teach the world to sing...Then, still there is this longing.

The Root of Conflict

James wrote a sermon for Christians who were finding it was hard to be Jesus. The world, you see, is not any worse today than it used to be, and human nature being what it is, they protected themselves and positioned and dominated the same way most of the world does today. It was becoming obvious that believing in Jesus was not really changing the way they lived.

"Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from?" he asks. "Don't they come from your own cravings? You rival each other to death!" This sounds a lot like what Paul, another Christian leader, was saying, "I don't understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."²

The problem is simple. James told them they had to address the core of the problem. Each person believes that his or her own protection, position, and benefit are the most important thing, like they are the most important person.³

Self-centeredness: each person wants the first pancake, never mind another's hunger. Each wants the road to herself. No one wants to be Jesus.

So rivalries tear us apart.⁴ According to James, it even happens at church.

So if you want the harmony, you have to make a decision. You have to decide that you aren't the center and you're not going to harm others: watch what you say and mind what you do. You have to decide that you won't wait for someone else to be Jesus.

You be Jesus.

A number of our members are studying a little book between now and Easter called *Three Simple Rules*. It says right off, that deep down, most of us want to live a life in which we are close to God and obedient to God's expectations. But in this world of hurt and competition, it's downright difficult.

It says that when early Methodists asked for some direction on how to live an authentic Christian life, John Wesley took the lessons of the scriptures and boiled them into three simple, yet challenging rules: do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God.⁵

These are the simple ways to *be Jesus*. And it starts with doing what the writer of James says: change your attitude. As long as you think that you are the center of the world and everything is supposed to revolve around you, you're apt to clash with everyone else who think they're the center. You'll rival each other to death.

But move out of the center and let your world revolve around God instead of you and you're apt to see others differently. You may even desire *not* to harm them.

Do no harm. During the brutality of apartheid in South Africa it was evident to Desmond Tutu that one day the tables would turn and the oppressed majority would be given control of the land. He warned them then and continued to teach them when their history finally turned its corner: "Don't believe that your victory will give you a license to get even. Your oppressor is also a child of God, worthy of dignity and subject to be loved. Have sympathy, because their oppressiveness is doing as much damage to them as it is to us. And when we are victorious, forgive and love. Treat them like a

child of God: that's when there will be true healing and peace. *There is no future* he said, *no future without forgiveness.*

The only way to work through the tough stuff is to go and work it out. Don't offend. Don't dominate and don't retaliate. Forgive, so the world can sing a song of peace that never goes away.

I want to say that Jesus' Way gets practiced first...here in the faith community. The Spirit is among us to bring God's shalom into the world's view. It's not that we will always be unworldly-free from conflict, unlike any other group; but it's that the way we handle the tough stuff will be different than the world usually sees. This is where, in the words of Desmond Tutu, "Love is stronger than hate."

The Center – The Heart

Rob Bell, from Mars Hill in Grand Rapids says that he was with a group of people who were discussing the kind of work each did, and the kinds of places they had been. One person was a marine who fought in the Gulf War in 1991; he led one of the first groups into enemy territory where he was shot at in the thick of battle.

Then he said that they had just quickly won a battle and were lining up Iraqi soldiers, handcuffing them when "one of them ran up to him waving a letter, begging to have it sent immediately. The man was frantic and starting to cause a scene. He kept repeating that this letter he was holding had to be sent immediately. He then looked the marine in the eyes and said, 'Please mail this letter for me. It's to my father, and he must know that I love him.'

"The man telling the story paused, looked around the table at each of (the people in the group), and said, 'He had no idea about the troubled relationship I had with my own father. Here I am, out in the middle of nowhere in the desert of Iraq, trying to arrest a group of soldiers who moments before were trying to kill me, staring at a man who wants me to mail a letter for him, thinking, *I could be him.*'"²

"I could be him." Chances are that the people with whom you are having a tough time are more like you than not. Chances are that if you were walking in their shoes, you might see things like them, you might have made the same mistakes, you might have been acting out of the same kind of pain.⁶

Jesus says, “Be relentless in trying to understand. Don’t give up trying to work it out.” And James says – if you can get yourself out of the center you might discover it’s not all about you. Get yourself out of the center and you’ll stop making things worse. Get yourself out of the center and you’re on your way to finding peace because really, it’s God who’s at the heart of things.

And at the heart of God is this “song of peace that echoes on and never goes away.”

God loves you so much...that you are invited today to take the burden of the center off your shoulders. *You be Jesus*, and work at turning conflict into peace.

¹ *I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing (In Perfect Harmony)*, written by Roger Cook, Roger Greenaway, Bill Backer and Billy Davis. Produced by Billy Davis. © 1971.

² Romans 7:23

³ Martin Debelius, *James* “A Commentary on the Epistle of James.” Philadelphia: Fortress Press. © 1976. p 215

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 216

⁵ Rueben Job, *Three Simple Rules* “A Wesleyan Way of Living.” Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press © 2007 pp 7-10..

⁶ Rob Bell, *Sex God* “Exploring the Endless Connections Between Sexuality and Spirituality.” Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. © 2007. p 25.