

“In Over Our Heads”

You know, when I started writing my sermon and before I finished the first paragraph I realized that this sermon read more like a position paper for a systematic theology class in seminary. What a yawner, who is going to be able to keep from falling asleep if I go this way. So, I started over. By the way, if you're interested in going deeper, in exploring the questions of our text each week, I encourage you to come to one of our book studies during the week. There we have 90 minutes to hash out these ideas about God that will inevitably help us be more intentional on our faith journey.

So, as usual, we are given 3 passages from scripture this week. The first is from Genesis and it shares the story of Cain and Abel and Noah. The second is Psalm 51 which is a universal confession. And then we have the letter from James that asks the question “What is the source of our conflicts.”

I wrote my sermon in front of a muted TV on Friday morning and as I typed, “What is the source of our conflicts?”, the greatest conflict that I've ever witnessed in my lifetime was unfolding before me, and I wondered as I gazed back and forth between my computer screen and the TV screen – “what is the source of this conflict?” Maybe, just maybe, if we can point to and address the True source of the conflict, then the conflict will miraculously dissolve, and we can live happily ever after.

This past week's discussions led me to reflect on why I chose to be a United Methodist. In my mid-thirties I became a member of my first church ever because the theology seemed to lift up two aspects of my faith: my personal journey toward and heart of God (called personal piety) AND my desire to transform the world through justice.

I've told this story before but it's worth repeating, especially because many of you have not heard it, and maybe even more of you forgot. I have a friend who is currently a DS in the UMC. Her father was a United Church of Christ pastor (UCC is an extremely liberal denomination that focuses on social justice and loving the poor). Her mother was a Southern Baptist (Southern Baptists are focused almost primarily on loving Jesus). When Erin was in her early 20's she told her parents that she felt a call to go to seminary. Her mother and father were ecstatic. “That's wonderful! Will you join the UCC church or the Southern Baptists?” And Erin replied, “Well dad, you are all about loving the poor, and mom, you're all about loving Jesus. So, I decided I'd do both and join the United Methodists.”

United Methodists believe that our own individual relationship with God is intricately related to our collective relationship with the world. We receive God's undying and uncompromising love AND THEN we pass on that undying and uncompromising love to the world.

What is the source of conflict? Cain famously asks God, “Am I my brother's keeper?” Perhaps our source of conflict begins with Cain's question. “Are we responsible for one another?” If we **are not** responsible for our fellow brothers and sisters, then we probably will primarily pursue a life of pleasure for ourselves and maybe extend to those we love. If we **are** responsible for our fellow brothers and sisters, then we will primarily pursue a life of serving others. In last week's scripture we learned that having the same mind as Christ Jesus means that we put others BEFORE ourselves.

What is the source of conflict? James paints us a picture where we can choose to be friends with the world or friends with God. But we can't be both. Let's explore the difference.

Friends of the world are quite comfortable with the societal model of Have's and Have-nots. Friends of the world believe that the world is designed for some to have power and some to have no power and that's just the way the world turns.

Friends of God reject this hierarchical model and believe that all God's creatures are of equal worth and dignity and no human or group of humans should have power over others because God is the only power humanity should succumb to. Friends of God believe in the Kingdom of God here on earth.

Friends of the world are oppressors and often don't recognize that they actively oppress others.

Friends of God oppose all forms of oppression from the most overt practices like slavery of Africans to the somewhat invisible practices stemming from white privilege.

Friends of the world take advantage of the vulnerable.

Friends of God take the side of the vulnerable.

Friends of the world stand on the shoulders of the poor.

Friends of God offer a helping hand to the poor.

Friends of the world will fight to the point of violence to get what they want.

Friends of God choose non-violence.

Friends of the world dominate.

Friends of God seek equality for all.

Friends of the world create injustice among humanity.

Friends of God seek justice for all.

James tells us, we can be friends with the world OR we can be friends with God, but we can't be both.

What is the source of conflict? In my view, in the Wesleyan tradition, in Jesus' teachings, in Michael Jackson's wisdom – the source of conflict is in the man (or woman) in the mirror.

And so, with that, I'd like to now read our scripture reading for the day from Psalm 51, translation is by Jerry Webber, and we will be breaking it down stanza after stanza.

*Mercy me, dear God,
Mercy me in Your unending love.
I cast myself on Your mercy
and upon Your willingness to pardon my indebtedness
to You,
my fellow humans,
and the planet.
I owe to each more than I could ever repay.
I've presumed to act out of my own self-interest.*

My indebtedness outweighs my capacity to repay.

If this is our prayer, we acknowledge that we take more than we give. We acknowledge that we act out of our own self-interests rather than the interests and well-being of others.

Some of my sin I know and some I can't even see.

But You see it all.

And in those moments when I turn away from You

to my own self-fulfillment,

I recognize full well how firmly my self is at the center of my life.

I've turned aside from You.

I've sought from another source what only flows from the Source.

I have no grounds to stand on,

no way of explaining away my actions.

Besides, You see what lives inside me

much more clearly than I do.

You've seen all along how self-serving I am,

how my pride and greed control me,

no different from the rest of the race.

Surely I have been descended from father Adam and mother Eve.

The psalmist understands that our egos get the better of us. Whether we perceive ourselves to be better than others or worse than others, both perceptions are egotistical because both perceptions put ourselves in the center of everything.

My sin is my own,

yet held in common by our race.

The twisted jumble of motives and urges to control

are closeted so deeply within me,

hidden so thoroughly from my own eyes,

so much a part of my own darkness,

that I could never see them,

much less identify them,

on my own.

The prayer asks God to help us see, because you know what, we're all blind to some extent when it comes to how we live. If we ask God to reveal to us the transgressions that we cannot see within our own lives, within our own darkness, then God will shine the light and show us where and how we have strayed away from our true calling.

Shine the searchlight of Your love into every

*corner and crevice,
crack and closet of my life,
until my inner darkness is named for what it is
and brought to Your healing light.
Bathe me in that healing light.*

Here is the good news! We are all filled with cracks in our lives, broken in any multitude of ways, but that's how God gets in. God is able to touch us through our brokenness! And when God pulls us out of our own self-centered-ness, that is when we can experience the only kind of joy there is. The kind that comes from God and allows us to heal our corner of our world.

*Change the landscape of my heart,
the way a snowstorm changes the landscape,
alters the terrain.
Rather than the pain caused by self-centered-ness,
bring joy and gladness to the world from my healed heart.*

*Don't hold my sin against me.
Look on the person You've created me to be,
not the ways I've misspent myself.
Rebuild my heart;
don't throw me away.
Deconstruct these ingrained patterns of control, greed, and anger,
and rebuild in their stead a life of love,
that is connected soul to soul with every created thing.
If You remove Your spirit,
I might as well die.*

The psalmist knows, and anyone who has had a glimpse, a taste of God's presence knows one thing.... Life without God is a life not worth living. Life without God is void of true joy, true peace, true hope and true love. **Life without God is the source of our conflicts.**

Let us pray...

God of all creation, we long to be friends with you. We long to be Alive. We long to join you in your continuing formation and reformation of the world. We long to work alongside you, to participate with you, as your friend, to receive your love and pass it on. We see the darkness all around us in the world we live in, but we sometimes cannot see the darkness that lives within us. We ask, as the psalmist does, that you shine your light into our lives. That you bring to our awareness the way in which we love the world more than we love you. And as we see our misgivings, may we turn away from them, ask forgiveness and embrace the way of truth and light. We know dear lord that the source of all conflicts begins in the human heart. Give us a

clean heart Lord, so that we may offer wholeness and healing to a very dark, broken and conflicted world. Amen.