

**"Envy and Ambition"**  
**Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday of Kingdomtide**  
**Lectionary Year B**  
**September 20, 2009**  
**Texts: James 3:13-18; Mark 9:30-37**  
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In a sermon I preached back in July, I talked about the problem of hierarchicalism, the subjective ranking of one thing over another. I stated in that sermon my personal belief that hierarchicalism is the first result of original sin, because it seems to be in our very nature to play the game of "it's better to be" this way than that way.

So it should come as no surprise that Jesus has to chide the disciples for playing that game instead of listening to him try to teach them about his death and resurrection. They preferred to argue among themselves over who was the greatest. And obviously hierarchicalism had crept into the churches to whom James is writing, enough so that he feels compelled to describe the fruits of hierarchicalism, namely envy and ambition, as being no less or other than earthly, unspiritual, and devilish, resulting ultimately in nothing but disorder and wickedness of every kind.

Instead of talking about the effects of bitter envy and selfish ambition in the world of business or government, my usual and favorite targets, I am going to describe how it occurs in the life of the church,

and not the church in general but specifically among the clergy in the North Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. *Our* conference in *our* church.

Why am I doing that? Because I think it shows how pervasive this problem is. No institution, not even the church, is exempt from having to deal with the results of envy and ambition. I also think it is appropriate to do so because both Mark's Gospel and James' letter are seeking to address the issue as it occurs in the church, not in society. So I am following their lead and doing the same thing this morning in this sermon.

Ours is a hierarchical conference, an *extremely* hierarchical conference. That is because we have some of the largest churches in the whole denomination in our conference, right along side small and medium size congregations. There are some annual conferences that are made up primarily of churches that are about the same size. Those annual conferences are usually characterized by a warm sense of community and camaraderie among its clergy.

Such is not so much the case with ours. We are hierarchical, which means that below the surface and working against any genuine sense of connection among our clergy, is a cold sense of competition. As is the case wherever it occurs in our society, bigger is seen as

better, so the ministers who pastor large churches are valued by themselves, their congregations, and the conference as being superior.

It should not be surprising, then, that there is envy, at times even rather bitter, among the ministers of our conference. We clergy are tempted to worship the god of upward mobility right along with the members of every other profession in our society. Several years ago I wrote some song lyrics as a way of exposing and being critical of what I perceived as the attitude of many of my colleagues.

So I want to share with you the words I wrote to the tune of the Garth Brooks song "Friends in Low Places." My version is entitled "A Church in West Plano," based on the fact that some of the largest churches in our conference just happen to be located there. Here's how it goes:

Blame it all on my members, they're nothing but sinners  
 and won't do what I tell them to do  
 They think I'm just crazy, but the truth is they're lazy;  
 they come but one Sunday in two  
 Well it's no great surprise that  
 here I've seen the demise of all my political schemes  
 But one little move, and it'd surely prove  
 the cabinet's sharing my dreams

(Chorus)

I want a church in West Plano  
 Where there's so many members it puts a strain on  
 the parking lot; the biggest problem they've got

I want a church in West Plano  
 If I pastored there it'd be the same,  
     so Bishop, please send me to West Plano

Well I may be wrong to think that I don't belong  
     as the pastor of a small church like this  
 But I have no doubt that I'm really cut out  
     for a large church, and that is my wish  
 I need the big numbers 'cause my ego just hungers  
     for position and power and fame  
 So please let me move, and I know that I'll prove  
     I can play this hierarchical game  
                     (Repeat Chorus)

So much for the problem of envy in the life of our annual conference. What about ambition? How does the problem of selfish ambition play out in conference life among the clergy?

Are you familiar with the idea of a "Potemkin village"? Supposedly, Potemkin villages were fake settlements erected at the direction of Russian minister Grigori Potemkin in order to fool Empress Catherine II during her visit to Crimea in 1787. According to the story, Potemkin, who led the Crimean military campaign, had hollow facades of villages constructed along the desolate banks of the Dnieper (Nee-per) River to impress the monarch and her entourage with the value of her new conquests, thus enhancing Potemkin's stature and standing in the empress' eyes and securing his political future. In a modern political context, a Potemkin village refers to any hollow or

false construct meant to hide an undesirable or potentially damaging situation.

Ambition among the clergy in our annual conference has led more than one aspiring minister to create a "Potemkin congregation" for the benefit of the bishop and cabinet, with the idea being that if the pastor's church appears to be better in some way than it is in reality, such a hollow or false construct will increase the chances of his or her being appointed to a larger and more prominent church.

The easiest and most obvious way of creating a Potemkin congregation is to be less than truthful about the church's actual membership. While it is hard to add non-existing new members *to* the rolls, it is relatively easy to keep non-existing members *on* the rolls by refraining from removing those who are inactive or have either moved or joined other churches. Since a church of 450 members is viewed a little more favorably by the conference than a church of 300 members, to use a completely arbitrary set of figures, it is understandable why the practice is relatively common.

But pastors can create and maintain Potemkin congregations not only in terms of size but also in terms of health. More than one minister desiring to be upwardly mobile has made his or her church out to be less problematic than it is in actuality. So the hollow facade of an idyllic community of faith is offered up to the cabinet as a

testimony to the pastoral effectiveness of the minister who would like for his or her next appointment to be significantly better both in size and health. But the problem inevitably comes when the pastor is moved and another one follows and walks into an ensuing trap that can be aggravating at best and devastating at worst. Here are some examples of real-life situations I've heard about:

Example One: A minister comes to his new church appointment to find out that the supposedly full-time choir director is spending only about a quarter of her time working for the church and the other three quarters working for her own business which she runs out of the church without having to pay any building use fees.

Example Two: A minister comes to his new church appointment to find out that the volunteer youth director, a lay person in the church, is given unrestricted access to the computer in the church office. On a regular basis he examines the congregation members' individual financial records and then confronts those members he feels are either behind on their giving or are not giving what he determines is an adequate amount the church.

Example Three: A minister comes to his new church appointment to find out that the lay person in charge of planning the worship services insists, among other things, that the pastor not preach from the pulpit because of its overly dominant elevation, that the Apostles'

Creed never be used because it reflects a chauvinist church, and that many of the congregation's favorite hymns never be sung because they are entirely too militaristic.

Example Four: A minister comes to his new church appointment to find out that the chair of the congregation's Staff-Parish Relations Committee is prepared to provide additional funds and other perks to the minister under the table if the new pastor will agree to like the same people the committee chair and his wife like and dislike the same people they dislike. The SPRC chair even goes so far as to thumb through each page of the church's pictorial directory to make sure the minister gets a good look at the people he is to get close to because they are to be his friends and those he is to remain distant from because they are to be seen as enemies.

I am not making any of this up. I have it on good authority that every example is completely true. In each case the minister involved confronted the situation with the result that the people engaged in the described inappropriate and unhealthy behavior left the church. I wish I could say that all of those departures, each entirely necessary to improve the life of the congregation, did *not* lead to complications for the minister that had a detrimental affect on his ministry. Unfortunately I can't.

In half of those examples the minister enjoyed a full and productive tenure at the appointed church. In the other half, however, his tenure at the church was severely cut short: he stayed at one appointment for a year and at the other for a year-and-a-half. And in each case the previous pastor—the one who was fully aware of the inappropriate and unhealthy behavior of the individuals involved and chose to allow and condone it by casting a blind eye toward it—was rewarded for his or her failure to act responsibly and in the best interest of the church by being appointed to a larger and more prominent congregation.

Not only do clergy suffer from the effects of the envy and ambition of their fellow clergy, but congregations do as well. That's what makes it *bitter* envy and *selfish* ambition. But the question has to be asked, "Why?" Why is envy allowed to exist and ambition allowed to proliferate in the life of our annual conference? In the words of Deep Throat in the movie *All the President's Men*, I'm afraid we have only to "follow the money" to find the answer. Ministers want the higher salaries that larger churches offer, and the conference wants to receive the apportionments that churches tend to pay when they are happy, not necessarily healthy, but content nonetheless.

So what James is saying in his letter to his congregations is entirely correct and accurate. "For where there is envy and selfish

ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind." It is true in the institution of the church, the institution I know best, just like it is in every other institution in our society. But it doesn't have to be that way.

We could, if we wanted to and as James suggests, purify our system, making it less hierarchical and thus less prone to bitter envy and selfish ambition. We could, if we wanted to and as Jesus suggests, give up our desire for position and prestige and choose to become as a child, as one with a lowly status, far removed from the desperate desire for upward mobility to reach the top of the hierarchy. Imagine what the church would be like if freed from the politics of envy and ambition. Imagine if that freedom were experienced by business and by government following the example of the church. Imagine the transformation that would take place in our world as a result. Imagine what a world that would be.