

SERMON: Cravings at War Within Us

TEXT: James 3:13 – 4:3, 7

Bologna. Bologna is what I craved during my first pregnancy. More specifically, bologna sandwiches, with mustard and dill pickles. It was one of my favorite sandwiches as a kid, and now, when I was preparing to become a mother, I not only wanted it, I felt like I needed it. One evening at around nine p.m. I sent my husband to the grocery store because I needed some bologna. He obliged, and he also brought me home one of those giant Hershey bars, which in my more *normal* days I would have had trouble not eating all in one sitting! But, with that pregnancy, I wasn't much interested in sweets at all. I wished that this particular aversion would stay with me after I gave birth, but no such luck. My sweet tooth came back to life; I immediately went back to being a chocoholic; and I still enjoy bologna sandwiches.

Supposedly most pregnancy cravings are the result of the body's need for more protein or dairy, or more of a particular vitamin found in some foods. Now, I'm not going to try to argue that the body – at any time – needs bologna. It is a processed meat product, after all, with very little nutritional value. But it is high in sodium, and the body might legitimately need more sodium when it's trying to grow a person.

But I remember reading about some really bizarre cravings even worse than bologna. Laundry soap, for instance. Also, cigarette ashes, mothballs, dirt, charcoal, toothpaste, and coffee grounds. As you might imagine, these types of cravings are extremely unhealthy and potentially dangerous to both mother and baby.

The passage we read from the letter of James points out that “conflicts and disputes” come from CRAVINGS AT WAR WITHIN US. It makes perfect sense; we’ve heard the message before. But the words James uses makes me think about this differently.

He goes on to give examples. “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.” Sounds like what we might call greed or envy. *Cravings* is a good descriptor, as well. Other translations use the words selfish or evil desires, pleasures, passions, lust. But here’s why I think *cravings* is a particularly forceful word.

As I mentioned regarding my pregnancy, the cravings I felt were strong. I didn’t just *want* what I was craving. I needed it. The need was intense and urgent.

In my mind, cravings are one step away from addictions. This is serious. Our cravings are ruling us; they are “at war within us.” They cause conflicts and disputes among us. They draw us away from peace, and away from mercy. Cravings, bitter envy, and selfish ambition draw us away from God. All of this is what James calls *earthly wisdom*.

Some of you may remember a story by Dr. Seuss called *Yertle the Turtle*. Yertle was king of a nice little pond. “It was clean. It was neat. The water was warm. There was plenty to eat.” But Yertle decided the kingdom he ruled was too small. He wanted his throne to be higher. “If I could sit high, how much greater I’d be! What a king! I’d be ruler of all I could see!” He ordered nine turtles to pile themselves up in a stack. Then he climbed up and sat on top. Soon he heard a faint sigh from a turtle named Mack on the bottom of the stack. “Beg your pardon, King Yertle. I’ve pains in my back and my shoulders and knees. How long must we stand here, Your Majesty, please?” This only angered the king. He decided his throne should be even higher, so he called for more turtles. “From all over the pond, they came swimming by dozens. Whole families of turtles, with uncles and cousins. And all of them stepped on the head of poor Mack. One after another, they climbed up the stack.” Again Mack groaned and called out to the king. “I know, up on top you are seeing great sights, but down at the bottom we, too,

should have rights. We turtles can't stand it. Our shells will all crack! Besides, we need food. We are starving!" groaned Mack. When night fell, king Yertle saw the moon in the sky, and became angry that there was something still higher than his throne. He stacked more turtles, and finally, from the bottom of the stack, Mack burped. The throne shook and came tumbling down. "And Yertle the Turtle, the king of the trees, the king of the air and the birds and the bees, the king of a house and a cow and a mule... Well, *that* was the end of the Turtle King's rule!"

This is a story about cravings and selfish ambition. Never satisfied, we are always seeking more and better and higher. Without regard for the needs of others, we use people as stepping stones to get what we want.

The disciples revealed their own selfish ambition when Jesus caught them arguing about who was the greatest among them. The astounding thing about this story from the gospel of Mark is that Jesus had just told them that he would be betrayed and killed and would rise again. Mark explains that they didn't understand and were afraid to ask.

But then to turn around and argue about who was best? I have to wonder if they were even listening. Their friend – their teacher, leader, and mentor – their Lord had just told them about the difficult road ahead that would lead to great suffering and death. And all they can talk about is *who's the best?! Are they really that cold and callous?* This is exactly the kind of earthly, unspiritual, devilish *wisdom* that James was writing about. CRAVINGS AT WAR WITHIN US. “You covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.”

One commentary I read turned the spotlight back on us. “It is hard to imagine that the disciples had so little understanding of what Jesus had been saying to them that they were arguing about which of them was the greatest. It is hard to imagine that, at least until we realize how often we would be silent if Jesus were to confront us and ask us what we have been talking and fretting about. Some of us spend a lot of time worrying about our status, trying to get the symbols of prestige, and seeking to maneuver so that we get the acclaim. Many of us would fall silent if we were asked to explain how what we are doing and saying accords with the way of life that Jesus sets before us.” (Harry B. Adams, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 4, p. 94*)

Such earthly wisdom is hardly wisdom at all. We applaud ambition and we crave fierce competition, we're always trying to "keep up with the Joneses" (as the saying goes), but too often, we let it go too far. We indulge our cravings to the point that they bury us in debt; our ambition blinds us to the needs of others; our competitive nature urges us to win at any cost.

Perhaps you've seen or heard about the campaign ad by a candidate in Arizona which uses the opponent's siblings against him, proclaiming their endorsement of the other. This is a perfect, yet unfortunate example of our cravings result in disputes and conflicts.

With wisdom from above, Jesus brings the disciples down off their high horses and back to reality with a small child. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.... Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Children bring us back to what is "pure, peaceable, and gentle," in the words of James. Children make us "willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." As we draw near to children and – if I

may add – those who are needy as children, we draw near to God. And God draws near to us.

So let us resist the CRAVINGS AT WAR WITHIN US. Let us sow in peace a harvest of righteousness. Let us seek to be filled with wisdom from above to the glory of God!

AMEN.