

## **Why Do We Quarrel?**

**Third in a Series of Seven Sermons, “Questions of Lent”**

**March 12, 2023**

**Exodus 17:2-3 - Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, Give us water to drink.” And Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?**

**James 4: What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.”**

**Dear Christian Friends,**

A husband and wife had stumbled into a nasty argument one day, which escalated into a shouting match. Both spoke words that were hurtful, and neither wanted to be the first to apologize. Their silent treatment lasted the rest of the day, through the night, and into the next day. As they traveled to a social gathering in complete silence, they noticed two billy goats with locked up horns, butting heads in a nearby pasture. The husband spoke first - “Relatives of yours?” To which she replied, “Yes, on my husband’s side.”

I’ve heard it suggested that if you could remove pride and stubbornness from our conflicts at home, at work, or in society, most of our quarrels would be over within five minutes.

Two weeks ago, we studied the account of Adam and Eve falling into sin, and we explored God’s first four recorded questions, the first three to Adam - Where are you? Who told you that you were naked? And Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat? And then to Eve? “What is this that you have done?”

Last Sunday we studied the account of God asking Abram to pull up roots and move his family to a destination unknown, and we explored the questions his family members may well have been asking along the way - like “where are we going? Are we almost there? How much farther? Are you sure this is the best route to take?”

We ended last Sunday’s sermon noting the crucial question God has been asking all of His people throughout human history through all the ups and downs of life,

“Will you trust me?” And listening in as the Spirit keeps on whispering into our ears, “Do keep putting one foot in front of the other, dear travelers.”

Today, we study the account of the nation of Israel on their way to keep their appointment with Yahweh at Mt. Sinai. Even though God had already brought them out of Egypt and through the Red Sea in amazing fashion, and even though God had already turned bitter water into sweet with a miraculous sign, and even though God had been literally dropping manna and quail out of the sky for them day after day, and even though at the oasis called Elim, they had enjoyed its twelve springs and seventy palm trees, here they were at Rephidim, where there was no water. Thirsty beyond what they could bear. One more time, they ran out of patience. Like a broken record, they grumbled and groused, moaned and groaned. Wished they were back in Egypt. Threatened to stone their leader.

Moses asks two questions. Why do you quarrel with me? And why do you test the Lord? Suggesting that as often as they complained against Moses, they were in fact testing the patience of Yahweh.

**Why do we quarrel?** In today’s Gospel lesson, we find Jesus witnessing to a Samaritan woman in the context of a **feud that had been going on for centuries**. The quarrel dated back to a building project where the Jews refused to let a Samaritan delegation help with the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple. The Jews hated the Samaritans because they were a mixed race, they had intermarried with the wrong races. As the years went on, purebred Jews refused to let the half breed Samaritans worship in the temple of Jerusalem. Resentments festered, division multiplied, and the baton of hatred was passed from one generation to the other.

**Three questions we ask today about our tendencies to resent, to be divided, and to hate.** 1) What’s the source of our quarreling? 2) Where does our quarreling lead? 3) What is God’s response to our quarreling?

### **Question #1: What’s the source of our quarreling?**

A story is told of a marriage where the lawn mower broke down and wouldn’t run. The wife kept hinting to her husband that he should get it fixed, but he didn’t get it done. Finally she thought of a clever way to make her point. When he arrived home one day, he found her seated in the tall grass, busily snipping away with a tiny pair of scissors. He watched silently for a short time, and then went into the house. When he came out, he handed her a toothbrush. When she asked

why, he said, “When you finish cutting the grass, you might as well sweep the driveway.” The doctors say he will walk again, but will always have a limp

**The source of our quarreling are three in number:** 1) our sinful flesh, 2) the devil and all of his demons, and 3) a broken and rebellious world. James explains that our passions are at war within us. Paul teaches that we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against forces of darkness. The good that we want to do we have a hard time doing and the bad habits that we really don’t want to fall into, we keep falling into them. Jesus teaches ever so clearly that it “**out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality**

### **Question #2: Where does our quarreling lead?**

Depending on who’s in charge at any particular moment in our hearts, there are two answers to this question. *Answer #1 is that if our sinful flesh is in charge*, our quarreling leads to frustration, unrighteous anger, broken relationships, a lousy witness, and worse. Ted Kober, in his book, “Built on the Rock: Healthy Congregations,” describes the slippery slope that sinful passions can take us on.

The slope could include seven different stages, starting in the heart with a desire, then a demand, then an unmet expectation, turning into frustration, sliding into a judgment, then deeper into a desire to punish, and in the worst case scenario destruction or even death of a relationship.

In the case of the Israelites, their slippery slope started in their throats with a desire for water. 2) Their desire turned into a demand, “Give us water to drink.” When Moses didn’t deliver in a timely manner, their 3) unmet expectation turned into 4) a frustration that God in fact had abandoned them, escalating into 5) a judgment that they were all going to die in this God-forsaken desert, eventually snowballing 6) into a desire to punish Moses by stoning him to death.

Where does quarreling and grumbling lead, if sinful passions are not checked through contrition and sincere repentance. Along the slippery slope of temptation, cooler heads do not prevail, mature folks can’t find the high road, forgiveness doesn’t make its way into the equation. Ultimately it can lead to the destruction of relationships, damage that lasts for generations, and death itself.

Thanks be to God that there is a better way, a way of escape that leads to a God of new beginnings and second chances.

*Answer #2 to this question of Lent is that as often as* the Holy Spirit is leading and guiding, our quarreling takes us into the presence of Christ. As often as the Spirit coaches and counsels us towards repentance, we find ourselves at the foot of the cross, where Jesus Christ paid the full price for every bit of our moaning and groaning. The cross, where the Lamb of God took away the guilt and the power of all of our quarreling and complaining, where the Son of God gets punished and we go free.

Which leads us to our final **Question #3 What is God's response to our quarreling?**

With the woman at the well of Samaritan, our Lord's response was to cut through centuries of conflict with an offer of the forgiveness of sins to a woman who had messed up life about as badly as a woman could mess up life in those days. It was to identify Himself as the fountain of living water to a woman who was about as thirsty as a traveler could be.

So also in today's Old Testament lesson, Moses takes the burden of the thirsty Israelites straight to the Almighty God of this universe and asks a third question, "What am I supposed to do with these people?" God's answer is as full of grace and mercy as it can be. No scoldings, no history lessons, no poisonous snakes sent to punish them. He showers his grace on his people Israel by means of this rock in the desert, just as God has blessed us in Christ, our Rock and our Redeemer, beyond all that we deserve.

**What is God's response to our quarreling?** I can tell you how my dad used to deal with kids bickering back and forth in the back seat of the car. Pretty simple, really - It was a two part strategy. Strategy #1 was to declare, "That's enough." And if one or more of us would cry out, strategy #2 was to retort, "quit your complaining or I'll give you something to complain about." And so it was.

I can tell you how I used to deal with my kids when they were bickering in the back seat. I would begin singing hymns out of the Lutheran Hymnal. And I wouldn't stop singing until they stopped quarreling. I'm not sure I helped them to appreciate Lutheran hymnody, but if I do say so myself, my strategy worked! It didn't take long before they begged me to stop singing.

In closing today, we see how our Father in heaven deals with us as we keep on going astray, we keep on sliding into conflicts that do damage to our life together and worse yet, reflect badly on the Savior we serve.

How does God respond to our minor skirmishes which escalate into major donnybrooks? How does God respond to our disagreements which lead to silent treatments and long lasting grudges? Does He slap us across the face and tell us to knock it off? No, He slaps His own Son across the face and declares us forgiven. Does God make sure we are wounded and crushed and chastised until we change our ways? No, God makes sure His own Son is wounded for our transgressions, He makes sure His only Son is crushed for our iniquities, He makes sure that upon His beloved Son there is a chastisement that brings us peace.

Listen closely, dear friends, as Moses strikes the rock in the desert, so does our Father in heaven strike the Rock, our Redeemer at the cross. As water gushed forth abundantly for the ungrateful people of Israel, so does Jesus offer living water to us here in this very sanctuary this morning. Even though we have fussed and fumed and failed and fretted our way through the ups and downs of this past week, our Savior would invite us to drink of the water He gives and never be thirsty again. And to know that the water He gives will become in us a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

The kingdom of God is like a group of thirsty travelers who do their share of complaining.

- On their bad days, they are quick to speak and slow to listen. Quick to argue and slow to apologize. Their burning desire to be right does significant damage to the hearts of family and friends.
- On their good days, they make the sign of the cross, they cry out for the forgiveness of their sins, they drink deeply of living water, and the grace of God is able to sweep over and rule inside of their hearts.
- On their really good days, the Holy Spirit has poured so much love into their hearts that it keeps on spilling over into the lives of those in close proximity.
- Every day, whether it is one of their best or worst days, they are children of God, dearly loved, and precious in His sight. Amen.