

## **Ambition**

9/22/24

(James 3:13-4:3,7-8a ; Mark 9:30-37)

Rev. J. Koyama

A central theme today is ambition, especially it's down side. You may wonder if it is a timely or worthwhile topic given the many things we could talk about. We could argue that for the most part, we enjoy the simple things in life and that ambition is not really a problem for us. Nevertheless, I think that considering the role of ambition in our lives does help to explain the unrest that is around us and within us. And so I think it is a worthy topic.

It seems to me that our default setting as Americans is to see ambition as part of a positive outlook. The direction we look to is onward and upward. And when we feel that we are on the upward trajectory, we feel optimistic.

Ambition has driven people to innovate and make contributions that have greatly benefitted us all. And it is hard to imagine what the "American Dream" would look like apart from the ambition to climb the ladder of success in one way or another. And we are encouraged to do what it takes to gain this upward momentum by the role models and authority figures in our lives.

But there is also a down side to ambition, that can come over us when that upward movement stalls or is reversed. Disillusionment, the feeling that our status and livelihood are being threatened, the fear of being left out, envy and even sometimes a desire to see others fail; these are the kinds of troubling emotions that can come over us, when we look over the fence into the neighbor's yard and compare.

They are also the kinds of emotions that I think are driving the argument between Jesus's disciples, as they quarrel over who is the greatest in this morning's Gospel. Yes, they are to be commended for taking a chance on following Jesus. And they continue to follow him, even after he has told them that they must take up their crosses and lose their lives in order to follow him. But when pressed they don't seem able to be quite so selfless. Somehow, the disciples continue to cling to the hopes and ambitions of the life Jesus has told them they must relinquish.

I'm pretty sure that my own ambitions began with a self-centered childhood. I don't blame any child for being self-centered. My feeling is that it is a necessary phase in healthy character development.

I was basically a daydreamer. I dreamed of a future in which everything would go well for me and all my desires would be fulfilled. And I had

parents who let me pursue my interests, even though they had their own ideas about how my future should pan out.

Somewhere in the process of growing up, my fanciful ambitions ran into a reality called “life”, and I began to realize that what I was doing and the opportunities that were presenting themselves to me never seemed to fit with what I had in mind, which made me feel perpetually unfulfilled. And this brought with it a nagging feeling of resentment and disappointment.

I felt as though my life had started off along the right track, but that somewhere along the way, I had been mysteriously redirected down a track I didn't belong on. And I had no understanding of why or of how to get from this wrong track back onto the track I belonged on. I felt as though years would go by wasted and I wasn't happy about it. That's what I think of when I read words like “bitter anger” and “selfish ambition” in today's reading from the Book of James.

What I didn't understand was how my life would never be what I wanted it to be if I continued stubbornly hanging on to a vision that was not rooted in reality. And more importantly I didn't understand how much my ambitions were not really mine at all.

I was almost 40 before I began to realize that my ambition to be a scholar was not actually mine at all; that it was an ambition devoutly wished on me by my father who, out of the goodness of his heart, wanted the same happiness for me that a scholar's life had brought to him.

I spent years in graduate school reading and studying, writing papers and sitting exams, with my eyes always wandering to the window, unhappily wishing I was outside in the sunshine and then forcing my eyes back to the page until finally I couldn't do it anymore. And all the while, I prayed that God would bring me academic success, without ever feeling that those prayers were being answered.

I never considered the possibility that, as the Book of James says, I might be "praying wrongly". But I was. I had been praying for a destiny that wasn't actually mine. Spending his life in a world surrounded by books was Dad's dream come true. But now I see clearly that God made me with other ideas in mind. So that all the while that my eyes were wandering from my textbooks to the open window, God was actually giving me the answer. But I couldn't hear it, because it wasn't the answer I expected.

And I assume that this is true for all of us to some degree; that none of us escaped being burdened with ambitions that were really someone else's and not ours, and that it caused us to pray wrongly for what God never meant us to have in the first place. And, as the Book of James suggests, these frustrated ambitions created a destructive turmoil to arise in our hearts. (Or perhaps I am reading too much of myself into your lives).

So what does it mean to have ambitions that are truly ours and to pray for them? I think it starts with praying in an open-ended way, without assuming that the answer we get is going to be what we expect.

“Show me what I really need and give me the courage to let go of what I think I need in order to be what you created me for”

is a good prayer, I think.

I thought that if I did not persevere in becoming a successful scholar, that I would life would judge me a bitter old failure. But when I finally let go of that dream, I felt so freed that I realized that I had been living with an albatross around my neck and given so much energy to what was an illusion.

I think that this matter of asking God to give us what we need, rather than what we want is key. When we ask for what we want, then wait for God to give us the answer we have already envisioned, we may not hear the answer at all. But when we ask for what we need, and don't know what the answer is going to be, we are forced to listen more closely with an open mind. And the answer comes.

At the same time, I think that the Bible gives us some reliable guidance on what to expect. Scriptures suggests to us that what we all need first of all is to experience being loved by God. When we experience the love that God so freely gives us, we are drawn into participating in it. And by participating in God's love, we are able to recognize our true selves and our true purpose.

It is an impartial, generous and freeing love that does not cut off any part of God's creation or reduce any others to a lesser value. God's love does not create a pecking order and is essentially non-competitive in spirit. We may compete in the marketplace or on the playing field, but true religion is never about competition. It is about cooperation.

When God's love becomes first in our lives the need to be seen as the greatest is revealed as the empty illusion that it is. And that illusion is replaced by a desire to serve that, to our delight, fits like a tailor-made

glove. It is as though a mysterious hand has thrown the switch that has transferred us back from the wrong track onto the right track where we belong; and we find ourselves heading in the right direction again and toward the right destination. And that is a very freeing experience.