

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice.” That’s the opening salvo in today’s passage from the Letter of St. James. Jealousy and selfish ambition are misguided results of something positive in human life: using our gifts to achieve something great. God has endowed each of us with unique abilities to use for the betterment of others. Some of our role models may be people who made our lives better because they used their gifts in this excellent way. Being like them means attaining personal excellence and using our gifts for the good of others.

James noticed something else. Sometimes, when we see the achievements of others, instead of taking joy and inspiration, we become jealous. We resent that they have gifts we don’t have. Then, as we develop our own gifts, we do it not so much for the good of others but for selfish ambition. For James, that’s where “disorder and every foul practice” originate—from this misguided view of accomplishment. He advocates instead a “wisdom from above,” and he lists a number of its qualities that flit by rather quickly in today’s second reading. One by one, they offer points of reflection.

First of all, he says, wisdom is “pure.” Yet some people spend spare time on impure activities, rather than the pursuit of wisdom. Wisdom is “peaceable.” Yet some people harbor resentments that disturb their own inner peace. Wisdom is “gentle.” Yet on social media platforms, many users cast slurs on others. Wisdom is “compliant.” Yet some of us form rigid opinions without listening to another person’s point of view. Wisdom is “full of mercy.” Yet some people choose acts of violence or entertainments that glamorize them, to steal goods or eliminate precious human life. Wisdom has “good fruits.” Yet some people squander the good things of life in favor of clinging onto the two attitudes James highlighted at the beginning: jealousy and selfish ambition.

These attitudes come from uncontrolled passions. James asks, “Where do the wars and where do the conflicts among you come from?” It’s not a rhetorical question. He delivers a searing answer: “Is it not from your passions that make war within your members? You covet but do not possess. You kill and envy but you cannot obtain; you fight and wage war.” You may even say something like, “I ask God for peace, but I don’t receive it.” James explains the reason: “you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”

God has given each of us physical, intellectual and spiritual gifts. He has also given us passions. But we sometimes let jealousy and self-ambition govern our passions. Far better is to use our passions to pursue wisdom. A couple of months ago, Pope Francis wrote a letter on the role of literature. He drafted it to expand the formation of priests, but then realized that this formation applies to everyone in pastoral work, “indeed all Christians.” Pope Francis writes, “The wisdom born of literature instils in the reader greater perspective.... Literature can greatly stimulate the free and humble exercise of our use of reason, ...a broadening of our human sensibilities, and... a great spiritual openness to hearing the Voice that speaks through many voices.” Reading won’t solve all our problems, but it will provide the wisdom to use our gifts and direct our passions away from interior combat and toward the good of others.