You Can’t Always Get What You Want

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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James 4:1-10

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I didn’t choose the pressure point topic for today, and I confess I’m a little jealous I didn’t get a different one like fear, anxiety, stress or struggling. These come to everyone, but who wants to admit to being jealous? It seems petty and small.

I have to face up to the fact that I am a jealous person, and probably have been my whole life. I’m a twin, which is one of my greatest blessings, but also one of my greatest challenges. Growing up, I was naturally shy, introverted, and emotional, and the more passive twin while my sister was extroverted, related well to people, was upbeat. My perception was that my sister was a better student, athlete, leader, and had what others admired. Because of my deep love for her, I couldn’t face then what I now know was true: I was jealous.

If we’re honest with ourselves, we all struggle with jealousy. From the beginning of time, jealousy has played a role in the story of human relationships. Cain was jealous of Abel. Jacob was jealous of Esau. Joseph’s brothers were jealous of their younger brother’s relationship with their dad. Yesterday, I wrote in a Realm post about Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr. History is filled with jealous rivalries and their often tragic consequences.

One of my favorite Pixar movies is *Toy Story*, which is in part about jealousy. The movie begins with a boy named Andy playing with his favorite toy, a cowboy doll named Woody. The opening song by Randy Newman playing in the background expressing Woody’s feelings toward Andy. It concludes: *None of them will ever love you the way I do; it's me and you, boy. And as the years*
go by our friendship will never die. You're gonna see, it's our
destiny. You've got a friend in me.

In the movie, the toys can talk and move around when
humans aren’t present. On the day of Andy’s birthday party,
the other toys are anxious and fearful that a new toy will
cause them to be replaced, put on the shelf, or even given
away. But Woody is not concerned because he has been
Andy’s favorite toy since kindergarten. As the leader of this
community of toys, Woody tells the others, “It doesn’t
matter how much we are played with. What matters is that
we are here for Andy when he needs us. Right?” Wrong!
Everything changes when Buzz Light Year comes into
Andy’s life and into their community.

The toys think Woody has laser envy because of all the
special features Buzz has, but that is not the case. Woody is
irritated that Buzz thinks he is a real space ranger and that
the other toys admire him so. In fact, Woody is jealous.

Let’s define our terms. Last week, Stan gave a great
sermon on greed. While there is a close relationship between
greed, envy, and jealousy, they are not the same. In his book
Signature Sins: Taming Our Wayward Hearts, Michael
Mangis writes, “While greed is primarily about possessions,
envy is about one’s place in the world. Where greed wants
the good things others have, envy wants to be the only one
who has good things. Envy is dissatisfaction with who God
has made me to be. It is also suspicion that God is
with-holding what I
deserve and giving it to
someone else.” Did you
catch that? Our problem
isn’t really with other

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people; it’s with God, who has the power to give us what we want.

Mangis goes on to say, “Jealousy is a form of envy that guards what one already has. Jealousy evokes rivalry where none is warranted and imagines competition where none exists.”

So Woody does not envy what Buzz has. Rather he is jealous because Buzz is threatening his place in the community of toys, and even worse, his special relationship with Andy.

Our passage for today from James makes clear that our real problem isn’t with other people or external circumstances. The real problem is what’s inside us—our heart. “Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?” (James 4:1).

All the fights and quarrels we have, whether they are in our marriage, family, workplace, or neighborhood, have the same source—the cravings or desires churning around inside of us. When these desires are not met as we want in the way we want when we want them, what’s inside is going to spill out—usually to the people in closest proximity to us, even if they’re innocent bystanders.

James goes on to reveal what the real problem is: “You want something and do not have it” (James 4:2). There it is.
The source of every conflict. As Mick Jagger sings, “You can’t always get what you want.” The word want here carries the force of “yearn for” or “strongly desire.” Every child knows this never-ending comparison to what others have that you want—a toy, DVD, the PlayStation, the front seat, a bigger portion of ice cream, a smart phone. It’s an endless list. But adults are no different. We want to be taller, thinner, smarter, richer, more successful, have fewer wrinkles, a buff physique, a cool car, a nicer house. You name it. We want what others have, and that can make us jealous. But, you can’t always get what you want. How does that make you feel? Well let’s see how it impacts Woody in this next scene. Pay attention to the images and lyrics.

All the changes and strange things that are happening in Andy’s room are merely a reflection of the inner turmoil Woody is experiencing as a result of feeling displaced as Andy’s favorite toy—a kind of disorientation he has never experienced before. Another toy tries to encourage Woody, saying, “Andy will always have a special place for you.”

But Woody is so jealous and angry that he tells Buzz, “Stay away from Andy; he’s mine. And no one is taking him away from me.” He depicts the truth that “Jealousy is the automatic impulse that arises when my deep value for a certain thing meets my hidden assumption of personal entitlement” (Dr. Jeremy Pierre).

Woody feels threatened and wants to hold on to Andy’s attention and affection. So he devises a scheme to knock
Buzz under the bed where he won’t be found for awhile. But instead, he accidentally knocks Buzz out the window. When the other toys find out what happened, they throw Woody out the window, too. Now both Woody and Buzz are outside the safety and security of their relationship with Andy and his room.

Woody’s solution of dealing with his problem is not unique. “Pain that is not transformed will be transmitted” (Richard Rohr). James 4:2 puts it this way: “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.”

James may be using the term “murder” or “kill” here as hyperbole, but local news this week of a death due to road rage makes clear this can be taken quite literally. Death was not the intention of the encounter, but it was the tragic outcome. Our quarrels and fights with others have to do with our efforts to satisfy internal desires in a manner that conflicts with the way others are trying to satisfy their own. Jealousy is destructive and can bring death to marriages, families, and friendships. So what can we do?

Stop the blame game and take ownership for your feelings. Until we own our share of the problem, we’ll always tend to blame the other person. And blaming never resolves anything. It just feeds the problem. Until we can own that our real problem is that we can’t always get what we want, we will continue to blame others.
Blame is an admission that we can’t be happy without someone else’s cooperation. This means our happiness and contentment depend on being able to control the actions and reactions of everybody we come into contact with. It’s never going to work. We can’t squeeze happiness and contentment out of the people around us. So stop the blame game and accept that you can’t always get what you want. Own your feelings.

There is more. James goes on to say, “You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:2-3). We keep expecting others to fulfill our desires in a way they were never meant to do and simply can’t do. We don’t get what we want because we don’t ask God. You may be thinking, “I’ve already done that. I’ve asked God to change the heart of so-and-so who is not giving me or doing for me what I deserve.”

That’s not what James is talking about. Prayer is not about getting what we want. Prayer is about communion with God, conversation with God. We pour out our hearts before him in a way that is completely honest and transparent, confident that He hears, loves us, and cares. We don’t have to pretend. We can bring everything to God, big and small. We can be honest about our marriage, parents, children, finances, career, education, appearance, possessions. Bring it on. We are to keep bringing everything to God in prayer until we are confident He cares for us. God’s answer to our prayers may be “yes,” “wait,” or “no,” but in the asking, we learn to trust
His love and His goodness and that He wants what is best for us.

A month ago, I shared about a very difficult period in my life when I was depressed. During that time, I experienced many negative emotions, including jealousy. I felt jealous of others who didn’t struggle as I did, were able to have children, had sufficient financial resources, easily found jobs and began new and successful careers. God could have given me these things, but He didn’t. You can’t always get what you want. I had to work through my feelings of jealousy, bitterness, and resentment. Praying the Psalms helped me learn to pour out my heart to God in prayer. In doing so, God transformed my pain and clarified my desire. I came to believe the words of Psalm 73:25-26: Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

God is the only one who can satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts. We can’t always get what we want—stuff, circumstances, or relationships. However, when we ask in prayer, we can trust God will give us what we need—a change of heart.

Let’s get back to the movie. When Woody and Buzz are thrown out the window of Andy’s room, they end up as lost toys who have to find their way back home. They eventually wind up as captives to the kid next door named Sid who likes to play with fire and explosives. They are in real danger...
and need to escape. But Buzz has finally realized the truth that he is not a space ranger. He is demoralized and dejected and has given up. Let’s watch the next clip.

In this clip, both Woody and Buzz are unhappy. I love this Basil Pennington quote: “All unhappiness is a result of not being able to do something I want to do, have something I want to have, or concern about what others will think of me.” But this clip is a turning point in the movie as both Buzz and Woody experience a change of perspective and a change of heart. Woody’s words remind Buzz that Andy’s name is written on the bottom of his boot. Suddenly he awakens to what is most true about him. He is not valued because of what he can do, what he has, or what people think of him. His true identity is that he is a deeply loved and valued toy that belongs to Andy. The same is true of Woody.

Woody and Buzz realize they don’t have to compare themselves or compete against each other because each has a place in Andy’s heart. In the end, they learn to cooperate and work together to find their way home to the one who loves them.

This is the journey we are all on—finding our way back to the One who loves us. Baptism is the sign that we belong to God—not because of who we are or what we have done but because of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. We can rest in the truth that “Every good and perfect gift comes from above” (James 1:17).
Jealousy is a sign of friendship with the world rather than friendship with God. We need to let go of jealousy, and James gives us a lot of good guidance on how to cultivate our friendship with and live out our true identity in Christ. A life of grace and dependence on Christ are found through three practices—humility, submission, and celebration.

Humility is key to staying grounded in our true identity. Humility is knowing our place in relationship to God. Humility is not about thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less. As Andrew Murray says, “Humility is nothing but the disappearance of self in the vision that God is all.” As we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfector of our faith, we will be less likely to become jealous.

If we can’t always get what we want, then submission is the practice that helps us to get what we need. In her Spiritual Disciplines Handbook, Adele Calhoun writes, “The desire of submission is to have Jesus as the Master of my life in absolutely every way. Submission that leads to growth means aligning my will and freedom with God’s will and freedom.” As we submit to God wholeheartedly, our distorted hearts can be healed and transformed so that we truly come to believe the Lord has good and loving plans and knows what is best for us. As we embrace God’s value of us, we are free to value other people and love them unconditionally as we have been loved.

In his book Enemies of the Heart: Breaking Free from the Four Emotions That Control You, Andy Stanley shares one sure way of breaking free from jealousy: “To guard your
heart against jealousy, you’ve got to celebrate the success, size, and stuff of those you’ve tended to envy. You need to go out of your way to verbally express your congratulations over their accomplishments. This must become a habit. Celebrating the success of those you envy will allow you to conquer those emotions that have the potential to drive a wedge in the relationship…. It’s much easier to behave your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of behaving. Don’t wait until you feel like celebrating; celebrate until you feel like it.”

The movie Toy Story ends where it began, with the title song You’ve Got a Friend in Me. Because Woody and Buzz each feel secure in their friendship with Andy, they can let go of any jealousy or need to compete or compare themselves to each other. Instead, they can say to each other, “You’ve got a friend in me.” Sound familiar?

In John 15:12-14, Jesus said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

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John 15:12-14

It’s true: we can’t always get what we want, but Jesus has already given us what we need. Jesus has said to us, “You’ve got a friend in me.” And as we deepen our friendship with Jesus and experience transformation, we can dare to let go of our jealousy of others and love others as he has loved us. We can look them in the eye and say, “You’ve got a friend in me.”