



Understanding the Origins of Violence

Gathering Time

Overview

Although we speak often of our own desires, we need to understand that it is other people who show us what to desire. Our appetites for food, drink, and sexual pleasure come from within ourselves, but *desires*—those longings that do not depend on physical needs or drives—do not originate within our own personalities. Others show us what is valuable. We are so interconnected with other people emotionally and psychologically, we are so aware of their opinions, their values, what they see and want, that we take our cues from them. It is other people who influence us in deciding what we want, what is valuable. Children, especially, are profoundly influenced by those around them. Adults are freer to select whose values they will share, but we are all deeply affected by the world around us. Conflict often arises when the imitation of the desires of others is followed by rivalry. If many people desire the same object, they may find themselves in small or large struggles. Not realizing that they are actually imitating each other as each tries to possess the desired object, rivals may become obsessed with each other. As each tries to inhibit the other's grasp, they may forget what it was they wanted in the first place and focus their anger and hostility simply on the other person.

Focus

This session will consider the origins of violence and rivalry by considering the nature of human desire. Because we imitate one another's desires, we become acquisitive and then competitive. Rivalry

follows and often generates disputes and violence. Peace is possible when we resist comparisons with others and look to Christ.

Opening Prayer

We ask for the gift of peace, O Lord,
and for release from those desires that can injure others.

We ask for the grace to desire what you desire
and to learn from your Son how to love and to forgive.

We ask this in the name of your Son,
our brother and our Savior.

Amen.

Group Reflection I: The Nature of Desire

Anyone who has been around children knows how imitative they are. Imitation is essential to the learning process, especially learning language. But children imitate more than behavior and speech. Children imitate desires. They want not only what others have but also what others want. If fifteen children were placed in a room with fifteen pink teddy bears, sooner or later, one child will pick up one teddy bear. The others will not calculate that there are enough teddy bears for each of them. They will begin to scramble for the teddy bear that the first child is holding. Why is this? The fact that one teddy bear is being held actually adds to its value in the eyes of the other children. This explains why children will squabble over one toy when there are many other toys available in the room. Parents are often bewildered by this apparently irrational longing for what another child is holding. If the toy is abandoned, suddenly neither child wants it. However irrational it may seem, adults are no different, although their expression of desire may be more subtle.

The entire advertising industry is based on what is known as mimetic desire, that is, desire that is learned from other people. Famous people are paid great sums of money to tell the world that they wear certain athletic shoes, drive certain kinds of cars, use a particular credit card, or purchase a special kind of shampoo. Advertisers know that the dramatization of desire or preference will stimulate that same desire in other people. If this were not true, they would not spend millions of dollars for the sole purpose of exciting desire in the viewing audience. We like to believe that we are not affected by these blatantly irrational promotions, but we are affected—and advertisers know that. We are all affected by the desires of others

even though we would like to believe that we are quite independent and can dream up our own desires.

Children and adolescents are especially vulnerable, but adults, as advertisers know, are easily swayed by the opinions and preferences of those around them. Our neighbors post signs on their front lawn telling us whom to vote for. They must believe that sign will have some effect on us. Our friends advise us to go to a certain restaurant or movie or to send our children to a particular school. We are urged to support specific causes and to cheer for a specific team. It has been said that fashion or “style” is simply social rivalry.

The person whose desires inform us of what is valuable is called the model. Parents are the primary models of desire, but when children reach adolescence and move into the adult world, television, films, books, magazines, teachers, and friends are all possible models of desire. If the model is worthy of their imitation, if the desire that is excited is wholesome and holy, mimetic desire poses no problem. We all must discern finally who is to be imitated, whose desires deserve to be adopted as our own.

The problem with mimetic desire, the desire that is an imitation of the desire of another, is that it can lead to conflict. When many people desire the same object—the latest toy of the latest craze, for example—they will skirmish in the toy store if there are not enough to go around. The fashion of the day determines what toys are desirable, just as it decides what we wear, and often what cars we buy, and what we purchase for our homes. When two people desire the same object, tension and rivalry often ensue. If one person in an office is promoted to the job that several people may want, the tension may be palpable. How do the others experience the disappointment of not getting what they want? What do they do with that disappointment? It may happen that their resentment is focused not on the job that they wanted but on the person who got it. In other words, the conflict of desires may turn people against one another. Children who are squabbling often forget what they were squabbling about and begin to torment one another. The object of desire can be forgotten as we focus on the person who is a rival claimant. Parents know only too well how difficult it is to prove to their children that they are all equally loved and equally precious even as children vie for attention and loudly point out the faults of their siblings.

Conversation

1. *Can you identify the people whose desires have influenced you?*
2. *Have your models of desire changed? Explain.*
3. *Can you give examples of unhealthy models of desire in American culture?*
4. *Have you ever been in a situation where your thoughts and desires were radically different from those around you? What accounted for your resistance to the pressure of your environment? What was the source of the particular value to which you were faithful?*

Group Reflection II: Understanding Rivalry

Mimetic desire, the imitation of the desires of others, is not necessarily dangerous. If two people have the same model of desire, and that model is transcendent or inaccessible to both of them, they will not be in conflict with each other. Two young boys can admire the same professional athlete—imitating his skills, wearing versions of his jacket, buying the athletic shoes that define their sense of identity, watching games together. However, if there is only one autograph available or only one ticket to the big game, or if one person cannot afford the jacket or the shoes, their desires may converge. If there is only one place available on their own team, they may become rivals. If rivalry intensifies, they may begin to focus not on the objects of desire, but on each other. They may begin to blame each other for whatever loss is suffered and concentrate their energy not on the ticket, or the jacket, or the shoes, but on the other person—the rival.

When rivalry intensifies into anger, words will be “exchanged.” The word *exchange* is important. Words will imitate words, blows will respond to blows, hurt feelings to hurt feelings. Rivals in dispute become mirror images of one another. Any teacher or parent who has tried to break up a playground quarrel knows the dialogue:

“He started it.”

“I did not.”

“Did so!”

Our domestic arguments are often verbally imitative.

“You always . . .”

“I do not always . . .”

“Yes, you do. You said . . .”

“I did not say . . .”

These arguments are not a search for truth, but rather trivial exercises in competition and rivalry, efforts to prove ourselves.

Children in a scrap will respond to each other with the same kind of blow: a kick is returned by a kick; a slap by a slap. Retaliation is usually mimetic as each combatant matches the attack of the other, often trying to surpass the violence of the other. When this escalates to nations with dangerous weapons, violence spreads exponentially. We cannot begin to be peacemakers until we recognize the seeds of violence in ourselves, as well as our efforts to conceal our violence by renaming it (justice, martyrdom, holy war, crusade). We are reluctant to see ourselves as violent, so we describe our behavior in morally acceptable terms. Our desire for vengeance will be called “justice.” Murderous suicide attackers will be proclaimed as “martyrs.” Cultural hatred will be explained as “religious zeal.”

Because St. Paul understood how the constant comparison of ourselves with others is often the source of resentment and conflict, he practiced his own form of nonviolence by not imitating his enemies:

For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers, by Chloe’s people, that there are rivalries among you. I mean that each of you is saying, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? . . .

—1 Corinthians 1:11–13

Then, after he describes how he has become “the rubbish of this world” in imitation of the self-emptying of Christ, he adds, “I urge you, be imitators of me” (1 Corinthians 4:16). Paul is asking the Corinthians to stop imitating one another and to lift up their eyes to Christ, as he, Paul, has done. “When ridiculed, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we respond gently” (1 Corinthians 4:12–13). Paul does not imitate those who insult and attack him. He does not reply because he knows that he cannot justify himself. Only God can justify him. Only God can declare that anyone is really guiltless. Paul asks the Corinthians to follow his example, not the examples they are setting for one another.

Conversation

1. *What is the best way to stop a dispute or argument that is getting out of hand?*
2. *How hard is it to respond gently when we are slandered? What would be the effect of such behavior in our relationships?*
3. *Do we ever know where our desires come from?*
4. *Why is the comparison of oneself with others always dangerous? What can happen?*
5. *Discuss a time or moment when you found yourself imitating others or seeing another as your model. What was the effect on your own sense of self?*

Silent Reflection/Journal Comments

Who has influenced me the most? Was that influence good? What kind of influence am I on other people? In a dispute, am I searching for truth or trying to justify myself? What kind of conflicts must I learn to avoid? How have I renamed my uncontrolled anger?

Invitation to Conversion

Try to reconcile with someone with whom you have had a dispute. If the issue is unimportant, accept blame—even if you do not feel guilty—and let it go.

Closing Prayer

Leader: We ask for the gift of peace, Lord,
that whatever is spoken from our lips may lead to peace
and whatever pain we have suffered
may lead to healing.

We ask for the grace to forgive,
the grace to ask for forgiveness.

All: Love is patient, love is kind.
It is not jealous.
It bears all things,
believes all things.

Leader: Love never fails.

All: O God, we ask for the gift of peace,
the grace to love,
and the courage to imitate Christ in all things.
We ask this in the name of Jesus,
who prayed for his enemies
and loved them to the end.
Amen.

Social Time

Resources for Prayer in This Session

Keating, Thomas. *Intimacy with God*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996.

Joncas, Michael. *As the Deer* (CD or cassette). New York: GIA Publications, Inc.

Resources for Continued Growth

Alison, James. *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996.

Grote, Jim, and John McGeeney. *Clever as Serpents: Business Ethics and Office Politics*. Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1997.

Williams, James G., ed. *The Girard Reader*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996.