

Mutually Drawing Near

“Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.” James 4:8

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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For those of you who have attended worship the previous 3 weeks, or even just last Sunday, you may be especially glad to know that today we come to the end of a month-long series of sermons from the no-nonsense book of James. James, not one to mince words, has written a very blunt letter, but it offers practical guidance for ethical living. His words of wisdom are useful to those of us trying to live a way of life modeled by Jesus.

Here's a brief recap. From the first chapter of James comes the following valuable instruction. “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger...rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness” (vv. 19-21). Then comes a summary statement, of sorts, of his entire premise on how to live life as a follower of Jesus. “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves” (v. 22).

From the second chapter of James we learned that there are certain behaviors and attitudes that are incompatible with the Christian faith. One of those behaviors is showing partiality and favoritism, especially toward those whom we think can do us special favors in return. We are called, therefore, to a life marked by *non-discrimination*, because playing favorites has the potential to lead us to break Jesus' command to love our neighbors – all our neighbors. The other behavior inconsistent with wise and faithful living is being *indifferent* to those in need, such as telling persons we will simply pray for them instead of actually doing something to help them in some concrete way.

In the book of James, **Christian faith involves not just what we believe about our relationship with God and each other, but also what we do with what we believe.** So in perhaps his most memorable pronouncement, James declares, “Faith without works is dead.”

Last Sunday, reading from the third chapter of James, we heard his scathing assessment of the damage that can be done by the words that come out of our mouths. In our day and age, we should also add the words that we put down in print, being especially cautious of knee jerk responses in emails and text messages. While James concedes that the tongue cannot be tamed, we still have the responsibility to try and control it at all times.

With that review, we come today to the second half of the third chapter of James through the beginning of the fourth, and full-circle with James' understanding of how to live a wise and faithful life. In addition to putting our faith into action, treating all persons equally, and watching what we say, James adds the warning of what will happen if we let our lives become dominated by envy and selfish ambition. **James asks, “Who is wise and understanding among you?”** (v. 13). He proceeds to provide the answer: **those who show that they are living a good life by works done with gentleness**

born of wisdom. He counters this wise approach to life with one dominated by bitter envy and selfish ambition, which lead to bragging and boasting, disorder and conflict.

Who among us, in all honesty, hasn't experienced what it's like to be envious of someone else, or to covet what others have? It may be envying someone else's talent, or intelligence, or sense of humor, or relationships, or good looks, or their job. It may be coveting someone else's financial well-being, their car, house, clothes, etc. So James asks, "Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from?" (James 4:1). Again he answers his own question. "Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?...You covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts."

Here's something that may help in that regard. There is a commentary on that old lament that we're all familiar with, "Life's always greener on the other side of the hill." The comment is, "Folks, there is no other side of the hill!" And yet, **we continue to yearn for and focus on what we do not have, rather than being grateful for what we do have.**

Then, in a difficult and often misinterpreted passage, James states, "You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your pleasures." While it is a good idea to question our motivation when asking for things in prayer, the word "pleasures" in this context does not refer to simple desires or things we care about deeply, but rather it can best be described as those things we selfishly desire for our own self-gratification or self-promotion. **James reminds us that envy, jealousy, selfish ambition, self-gratification and self-promotion are not marks of living life wisely.**

Today's passage closes with verses that are also difficult. "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and the devil will flee from you. Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you." Though the word "submit" is decidedly out of favor in our day and age, and rightfully so, we are nonetheless challenged to explore what it would mean for you and me, and for this congregation, to submit ourselves to God. Interestingly, the answer to that comes, in part, with the admonition to resist the devil. Without getting into a long theological discussion about what the "devil" is or is not, I think we can at least agree that in part it can be **anything that leads us away from God, or tempts us to not follow the ways of God.** This begs the question: **What would it take for you to resist those things that lead you, lead us, away from God?**

James follows this statement to resist the devil with a parallel statement to draw near to God. I do not think, however, that James had the intention of this being a simple cause-and-effect statement: *If we draw near to God, only then will God draw near to us.* **I profoundly believe that God, and therefore God's grace, is always near to us. Yet, is it not often the case that we do not experience or connect with that nearness and grace until we make the effort to draw near to God? By humbling ourselves and being receptive to God's grace we are much more likely to experience and connect with God's sacred presence. As we discussed in our study of Celtic spirituality, a sacred presence that dwells within and is a part of all things.**

So just as important as asking you to think about what it would mean for you to "resist the devil," **think about what it means in your life, and what it would take for you to draw near to God.** What would that look like for you? Our congregation? This presbytery? Our denomination?

Is there anything you and I can do, individually and together, to help make that happen? In reference to that, you may want to pick up a copy of the sermon series I preached this summer, "Connecting With God." You will find that it provides, from a

Celtic perspective, many different ways and understandings of what it means to connect with God. It also helps to remember that **the path to spiritual transformation is a continuing process. We turn away from God, we turn back again.** We turn away from wise and ethical living, we turn back to the ways of Jesus. And back and forth, time and time again.

So as we seek to draw near to God and continue to grow in faith and discipleship, remember and apply the wisdom shared throughout the Book of James.

- Pray for wisdom.
- Listen as much or more than you speak.
- Put your faith into action.
- Live your life in a way that doesn't discriminate against others or become indifferent to the needs of others.
- Speak only words that are helpful for building others up.
- Resist that which tears yourself and others down and pulls you away from godly living; especially resist envy, selfish ambition and resentment that can lead to disputes and conflict.
- Do whatever works for you to draw near to God.

Remember, there is mutuality in this process. It's more than just our efforts to draw near to God. It's also understanding that **God is always drawing near to you and me.**

And so we have come full-circle, learning invaluable and practical lessons from James that can help us to live a faithful life marked by the wisdom, to quote our own John Calvin, that comes from "knowing God and knowing ourselves." Live wisely!

Amen.