

Draw Near To God

“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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
June 22, 2008

Reach. Grow. Send. Remember these three words, for they perhaps best summarize the role of the church. Reach-Grow-Send reflects much of the current philosophy espoused by the Acts 16:5 Initiative, the Emerging Church and the Purpose-Driven Church Movements, and others, in developing a more missional approach to church transformation in the 21st century.

This contrasts with the more Institutional-maintenance approach that has dominated the past half-century.

In other words, **how can we learn to see ourselves and approach our ministry as a mission outpost right here in this neighborhood and city, more than simply focusing on our institutional survival**, spending most of our energy repeating the same programs year after year – as they have been done for the past 40 years or so.

Reach-Grow-Send is part of the answer. We all are too aware that the church needs to find new and more effective ways to **Reach** seekers and those not currently active in the life of a congregation. This, of course, has strong evangelism implications.

It's also a fact that we need to focus more on how to **Grow** in our discipleship, learning what it means to call ourselves a follower of Jesus Christ and growing in our Christian faith and practice. Worship, Christian Education, and even Stewardship play a major role in this component.

Finally, the **Send** component refers to being sent out into the world to actually enact and put into practice the life and ministry to which we are called. We are to do this in our personal lives and in the life of this congregation. This generally falls under the purview of Outreach and Mission.

I want to encourage not only every committee and ministry team of this church but also every member to constantly keep before us these principles of Reach-Grow-Send in our approach to all that we do as College Hill Presbyterian Church.

This morning I'm going to emphasize the middle principle: Grow. When we gather to worship, for example, we need to constantly reflect upon how this experience is teaching, empowering and helping us to grow in faith and discipleship.

One of the best ways to grow as a disciple is to learn how best to live out our Christian faith. That's one reason why I am so fond of the book of James.

Sometimes referred to as the “Proverbs of the New Testament” this book provides a practical guide to ethical living.

Over the past month we have been looking at several examples. We began four weeks ago with the passage from James 1:22, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”

For if we don't put our faith into action, incorporate it into how we live our lives, then what the point of faith in the first place? James goes as far as declaring, “Faith without works is dead.”

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. This violates Jesus' command to love our all our neighbors as ourselves. **Christian discipleship, therefore, is a call to non-discrimination.** Another behavior inconsistent with wise and faithful living is being indifferent to those in need.

Last Sunday, reading from the first half of 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. I guess we should also add, the words that we put down in print, including 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.

Do you remember the challenge presented at the end of that sermon? “See if you can go for 24 hours and 'speak no evil.'” So, how did you do? Did it cause you to at least think for a split second before you spoke? If not, here's the good news: there's always this week and the week after that to give it a try!

That brings us up to today when we heard the second half of the third chapter of James and the beginning of the fourth chapter, coming full-circle with James' understanding of wise and faithful discipleship.

So, 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.

Envy is a feeling of discontentment, antagonism, or resentment that comes from desiring or longing for someone else's qualities, attributes, or possessions. James warns that envy is a leading cause of disorder and conflict – within us as individuals, within the church, and yes, even on a global scale.

Who among us hasn't experienced what it's like to be envious of someone else, or covetous of what others have? It may be envying someone else's talents, job, good looks, intelligence, finances, or their relationships.

On a congregational level, churches sometimes become envious of the bigger church down the street. There's even a factor of becoming envious of another committee within our own church because they get a bigger slice of the budget. Or envious of some other program or group of people in the church that seem to get more attention than ourselves, or the program that we're interested in.

James states at the beginning of chapter four, "Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ...and you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts."

While we reflect upon the impact of this statement, let's look at what James suggests will move us back into wise and faithful discipleship. In an explicit call to conversion, James instructs us in verses 7-8, "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded."

Though the word "submit" is decidedly out of favor in our day and age, we are nevertheless challenged to explore what it would mean for you and I to submit ourselves to God.

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, in part, that it can be anything that leads us away from God, or tempts us to not follow the ways of 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 God will draw near to us.*

It is my profound belief and understanding that God is always near to us. Yet is it not often the case that we do not experience that nearness 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 God's nearness to us.

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 to draw near to God. What would that look like for you? What would you do to make that happen?

James continues his call to conversion by instructing us to cleanse our hands and purify our hearts. In other words, to pray for forgiveness, seek reconciliation, and to turn away from that which is not wise and faithful discipleship.

I know that we as Presbyterians, especially as progressive Presbyterians, don't talk much about **conversion**. Why is that? Primarily because it has become so entwined with a more fundamentalist approach of before-and-after types of experiences in becoming a Christian. But what James does is remind us that **conversion is a continuing process and an essential element in spiritual transformation.**

Agreed, too often, conversion is seen as a once-for-all thing. Turning to Christ is thought by many to be the *final* answer. Before, everything was cast in darkness, afterwards, everything is cast in light. But we know that life, even life as

a Christian, doesn't always work that way. That's why **James sees that conversion is never complete.**

There is always double-mindedness, what James differentiates as being guided by "wisdom from above" versus "wisdom from below." **Our growth in faith and discipleship is slowly and sometimes painfully won through many conversions. We turn away from God, we turn back again. We turn away from wise and ethical living, we turn back to the ways of Christ.** 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 in the book of James.

- Pray for wisdom.
- Put your faith into action.
- Live your life in a way that doesn't discriminate against 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 envy and resentment.

And let us remember: Reach-Grow-Send. Reach out to others with this message as we continue to **grow** as disciples, living a life marked by putting our faith into action as we are **sent out** from this place. Reach. Grow. Send.

Amen.