Sermon for:  September 23, 2018

                        Drawing Near, Both Ways

Hymn:  I Am Thine O Lord (Draw Me Nearer…)

Texts:

Psalm 1: Happy are those…(who) delight in the Law of the Lord.

            (KJV: Blessed are those who walketh not in the counsel of the wicked…)

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, Draw near to God and He (God) will draw near to you.

[Mark 9:33-37, He (Jesus) sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them…

I wonder, when reading Psalm 1, do we make it personal and think in terms of attending a Bible Study, learning more about our Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, grounding ourselves deeper in our faith, setting down strong roots like a tree’s, ready to weather the storms of life which prevail against us?

The short text from Mark which I read, comes as sort of an answer to a disagreement among the Twelve.  They have either failed to understand what Jesus has been talking about or have interpreted the words of Jesus in different ways.  To solve the problem, Jesus calls the Twelve together, he calls them over, sets them down, and instructs them.  He uses the charming illustration of the small child, but I want to focus on Jesus calling them together to be instructed (or as in the Psalm, in order to know more about Jesus and God, they will do a mini-Bible study from the Living Word in person).

The Letter of James might be understood to be a practical application of Christianity.  James applies the teachings of Jesus to the real world, then and now.  In the passage we read, there seems a listing of dos and don’ts, and suddenly a very startling simple statement, Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.  James is asserting more than simply attend morning worship, or go to a Bible study, to learn more about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit.  James is asserting something more profound than an academic learning opportunity.  James is saying that as you learn more about God, you are stepping closer to the living Lord God Almighty, AND the living Lord God Almighty is stepping closer to you.

In many ways our Christian Faith is to be a living, loving, relationship between God and each one of us, individually.  Perhaps God’s greatest desire is to be a living part of all of your life.  God wants to be your best friend, walking with you, listening to you, talking with you, guiding you, explaining things to you, making sense out of whatever is happing around you, working with you and for your good as Paul writes in Romans, “…we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love the Lord.”

And James says for this to happen you need to step closer to God while God is stepping closer to you.  It really does work both ways.  And, God really does walk with you.  God talks to you.  God would guide you.  God is working for your good. You can and will experience the reality of this as you commit yourself to drawing nearer to God.

As some of you may know, I have a full military career before retiring to enter seminary and be ordained to serve God’s civilian Presbyterian congregations. Vietnam was my war.  I came home from Vietnam with a severely shattered faith.  I was estranged from God.  Drawn by the Holy Spirit I was challenged to either give up my faith altogether or to get with the program and start back into the church.  I reluctantly took the challenge and started attending a local Presbyterian church near my apartment.  I was tentative as I arrived and sat as far back as I could.  It wasn’t that I was afraid the roof my fall in, but rather that I might be noticed and have someone speak to me.  After several weeks, being greeted by a wonderfully eccentric man, he dragged me over to the pastor who then drew me into his office, who on listening to my excuses and story, laid another challenge before me.  Why are you sitting in the back of the church?  Don’t you like us?  We’re friendly and want to like you.  Now there were all kinds of underlying concerns the pastor was overriding, my being Army in the days of Civil disorder over Vietnam, my being single, my being a Northerner in Houston Texas. I could go on, but I took a step towards God and here through the pastor God was trying to take a step towards me.  That step led to others, on both sides.  Later in Korea, still single, I learned that Christ’s Church is world-wide and filled with people who don’t speak English, who look a lot different than I do (and I learned how to be an ethnic minority).  In Washington DC, in the church we were both attending, I was led by God to find Margaret, my wife.  I attended Bible studies, lead Bible studies, learned about God, and truly found God as a living partner in all that I am and do and will be.  As I stepped closer, became more engaged in this Faith thing we believe in, I learned that God is not some academic concept, some distant abstract force, but a living loving person whom I truly enjoy being with, and to my great surprise and wonder, God truly enjoys being with me.  All this I must add, as a layperson in the church, before being called to ministry, before being ordained.  As a layperson just like anyone of us here in First Presbyterian Church Richland.

I am not unique.  What I experience, what I have experienced, is not unique to me.  The whole of the Bible teaches that what I am talking about is suppose to be the normal for all of us, for each of us.  The whole Bible, our whole faith, is personal, you and God, God and you, you and Jesus, Jesus and you, by the reality and presence of the Holy Spirit.

You live the solid deep rooted blessed or happy life, study your Bible by yourself or best of all with other believers, in worship and Bible study.  Take the time and be blessed, God is near.  If you don’t understand it all, not even a part, hear Jesus by the Holy Spirit to come on over, sit down and talk it out.  If you want to hear it better, understand it better, step closer as God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is stepping closer to you.

Amen

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