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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
9/20/2015, Pentecost 17B, Lectionary 25B
James 3:13--4:1-3, 7-8a
Humility and Drawing Nigh to God

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Perhaps because I have been thinking a lot recently about our dear member Ann Wilson, I find myself especially drawn to this lovely verse in this morning's Epistle Lesson:

Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. (James 4:8a, KJV)

That is James 4:8. "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you."

I think that is what we did in yesterday's memorial service for Ann. We sought to draw nearer to the Lord. Like hurt children running to mother and father, I think that it is the impulse of many a heart to draw closer to the God who made and gave us Ann and who is well able to give her to us again in the great day of resurrection. "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you." That sounds very good to me. We could use some more closeness with the Lord of all.

In my reading for this morning's sermon, I included the commentary on this text by an English theologian named Thorsten Moritz, from Cheltenham, England. I dutifully read his commentary on our passage, but at the end of my reading, I tossed the book aside, and muttered to myself, "Well, that didn't much help!" And that's how things sometimes go. You read, but not everything you read helps all that much.

Still, something the scholar said found its place in my mind and rattled around there a bit. In fact, in the nighttime earlier this week I dashed up from my bed to go do a little more reading because it had suddenly dawned on me that Thorsten Moritz might be on to something. He had rather by-passed St. James's saying about drawing nigh to God and had instead focused on the earlier parts of our Bible reading. But it began to dawn on me that what the scholar said about the earlier parts of the reading tied in with what St. James said at the end about drawing nigh to the Lord.

Those earlier parts concern conflict in the congregation. Apparently, there has been some fussing and fighting among the Christians the apostle is addressing. St. James even speaks of murder!

¹Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ²You 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 4:1-2, NRSV)

I certainly hope that St. James does not literally mean “murder”! I hope he means something like “hurtful speech that tends to ruin someone’s reputation.” But who knows? Even such hurtful speech would be bad enough. Clearly something has gone wrong in this Christian congregation, and St. James is trying to get them back on track.

So, here is the interesting thing Thorsten Moritz said about this reading. He said that St. James’s pastoral counsel would have sounded very strange to his people — revolutionary, in fact. The apostle was addressing people raised in ancient Greek morality, and he was commending the path of humility to them. But, the scholar pointed out, humility was not usually considered a virtue in popular thinking:

... humility was not usually regarded highly in Greek thinking.¹

This was the idea that kept rattling around in my mind and which caused me to jump up and go do some reading in my volumes of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. I tried to think of a discussion of humility in the dialogues of Plato or in the ethics of Aristotle. Nothing came to mind. You can count off the classic virtues in Greek thinking -- wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation -- but none of them are quite the same thing as humility. So, I went to consult my massive *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and to my amazement, there was no entry at all on humility. It was a definite hole in the index, missing right where it should have been between “Hume” and “humor.” David Hume, yes, and humor, yes, but not a thing on humility.

But humility is precisely the path toward peace being recommended by St. James. I think the apostle learned the path of humility not from Greek philosophy but from Jesus, who left heaven above, emptied himself (Philippians 2), lived the life of a poor man with nowhere to lay his head, and who sacrificed his life that others might live. I think James learned about humility from Israel’s scriptures, where we read, for example:

⁸He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8, RSV)²

¹ *The Lectionary Commentary: The Second Readings* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001), page 532.

² Thanks to Seminary Intern James Miller for pointing this passage out to me. Intern Miller is serving at my wife, Rev. Carol Fryer’s, church — United Lutheran Church, Mount Vernon, NY

What is humility? In this morning's reading St. James contrasts humility with the envy and self ambition and disorder and wickedness that disrupt human community. The apostle gives a positive description of the humility he recommends:

¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

In Christian moral thinking, humility is not a down-hearted criticism of oneself, nor a servile, abject manner, but rather a kind of joy and delight in people, including oneself. Humility acknowledges that none of us is perfect, none of us are all that far away from the dust from which we were created, and each of us is in need of God's grace if we are going to make it in this world and in eternity. Humility is the putting into practice of a spirit of equality toward everyone, both saint and sinner alike. Humility is the habit of refusing to distinguish oneself from the crowd, but rather rejoicing to be part of a crowd each member of which is cherished by God enough that the Son of God should die for each one.

We are made from the soil, the Bible says. We are made from dust. Have you ever seen a waterspout that drifts from the river onto the field? It can whip up that soil so that for a moment or two it forms a little tornado. It takes a shape above the field. It can move. It can even do some damage if it strikes something. Humility is the set of the soul by which one remains content to be good earth along with all the rest of the good earth. Humility declines to become a little tornado. Humility is peaceable, as the apostle says:

...peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy

And then, at last, I began to see a connection back to the verse that so draws our hearts:

Draw nigh to God and he will draw nigh to you.

It dawned on me that one of the practical ways of drawing nigh to God is to draw nigh to one another, for in doing so, we are drawing closer to people dearly beloved of God.

That is exactly where things go wrong in this morning's Gospel Lesson. What ails those disciples is that they are not lying low like the good earth they are, but are speculating about greatness and perhaps planning about rising up and distinguishing themselves:

³³And they came to Capernaum; and when [Jesus] was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the

way?”³⁴ But they were silent; for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest. (Mark 9:33-34, RSV)

Thus they were caught out! It was a natural human question: Who was the greatest! It is just that this natural human question is not our Lord's question. His concern is more along the lines of humility. Jesus connected greatness with humility:

³⁵ And he sat down and called the twelve; and he said to them, “If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” (Mark 9:35, RSV)

So yesterday, we drew nigh to God in every way we could. We drew nigh to him in praise, through the hymns. We drew nigh to him through prayer, in our earnest Amen! to the intercessions. We drew nigh to him in the Holy Communion – indeed right into Christ's presence in the Blessed Sacrament. But another opportunity for drawing nigh to God forever lies before us: Let us draw nigh to God by drawing nigh to John, to young John, and to one another. Let us practice that holy humility that delights in humanity as being like us ourselves – people beloved of God, beloved enough that Jesus died for us, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.