**September 19, 2021**

**Sermon: “Submitting to God” by Caroline Price-Gibson**

**Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.**

Is this not our soul’s deepest yearning?

**Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.**

It sounds so simple!

But we are complicated beings –

 tossed about by all kinds of conflicting desires – and “cravings at war within us”.

A part of us has no idea ***how*** to draw near to God—

Sometimes we feel close to God. Other times we don’t.

And sometimes we’re not at all sure we **want** to be close to God

or have God draw ***too*** near to us.

James speaks of how we want something we cannot have, so we commit murder. Sounds a little extreme!

But maybe **not** so extreme -- when we think of the consequences of

obtaining or producing the things we want, things we think we *need* –

 which have resulted in harming or even killing others.

It happens far away from us and direct link is not always clear

between the gas I put in my car and a drought in Madagascar.

If drawing near to God means changing my lifestyle, I’m not so sure I want that.

Quite apart from murder, which we can debate about,

I’m guessing each of us is acquainted with the envy and selfish desires.

We know what it is to skirt around the truth.

We find ourselves engaged in disputes and conflicts

–all things James tells us to avoid in our lives.

When envy overtakes us

and we make ourselves miserable comparing ourselves to someone else;

when we are consumed with wanting a particular thing and we know it’s selfish,

but we can’t put it behind us;

when we are involved in a conflict and we know **we** are right, and **they** are wrong –

it’s almost impossible to just let it go.

Drawing near to God is **not** something we are aiming toward

in the heat of the moment.

Besides, obviously God on our side in our conflict

Draw near to God and God will draw near to you --

James makes it clear that God does not take sides in our conflicts

and God does not support us in our selfish desires –

Drawing near to God requires of us something different.

There seems to have been a spate of weddings recently, now that we are hopefully,

maybe, just beginning to edge our way beyond Covid. -

Folks I met here last Sunday told me they’d be gone to a wedding this Sunday.

Then there was the glorious wedding of Becca and Brian last Sunday.

As a pastor, I’ve done my share of weddings. But one stands out.

Some years ago, I was the pastor of an inner-city church in Pittsburgh –

it was up Mt. Washington, overlooking the city.

I found myself the unofficial chaplain for a biker gang called the “*Sobermen*”.

Some of the *Sobermen* participated in the AA group which met at my church –

but none of them troubled the church with their presence,

except for those AA meetings.

I started out by doing funerals for the *Sobermen*— too many died, too young.

They’d had a rough life and were in a heroic battle against addiction.

But sometimes there were more joyous occasions.

When Brian and Jan came and asked me to help marry them, I was delighted!

I told the couple they were welcome to use the church for their wedding.

“No” they said, the church didn’t fit with their style.

They wanted to be married on one of the pods overlooking the city.

From the pods you could look down on the rivers and skyscrapers below.

Verniculars— little cable-car contraptions, would bring the tourists up to the top.

They would walk out on the pods and take pictures of the city below.

“Don’t you need a permit to use one of those?” I asked. –

“The city will never give ***us*** a permit– we’ll just show up”, they said.

Lots of bridal parties had their pictures taken on a pod –

no permit needed. Would this be so different?

On the appointed day and hour, I showed up, but no one else did.

I felt foolish hanging around all those tourists in my clergy garb.

Finally, I heard a distant roar—

the sound of forty bikers making their way up Mt. Washington,

accompanied by several police cars.

The bride and groom got off their bike and approached me—

I suggested that we move down the path to another pod, less full of tourists.

“Don’t worry”, said the couple. “Those people will leave”.

Sure enough, in no time, I and forty bikers had the pod to ourselves,

except for our police escort.

“What about the police?” I asked “Oh, they like to hang with us.” I was told.

We had the wedding service then they all roared off down the hill,

leaving the pod for the tourists.

I got to thinking about how the tourists gave the *Sobermen* a wide berth,

 while the police had their own reasons for wanting to draw near.

I got to thinking how the *Sobermen* wouldn’t be “troubling the church”

 with their presence.

Because, of course, no matter what the church ***said***,

their presence would ... have “troubled the church”.

Back in those days all that metal and leather, all those tattoos and piercings,

 the unconventional hair styles and loud bikes would… have troubled the church.

Hopefully, less so today, but back then, it would have made people feel….

uncomfortable.

We don’t like to feel “uncomfortable” when we come to church.

*“Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.”*

Is that a promise . . . or a threat?

Is it something that makes you feel hopeful—or does it make you feel uncomfortable?

Today, we read the lectionary reading from James –

I love the words “draw near to God and God will draw near to you.”

But much of the advice James gives – when he tells us **how** to draw near to God –

that part of the reading makes me feel uncomfortable.

He describes the way we should be living as Christians –

Don’t be envious or boastful or bitter. Don’t be going after stuff you can’t have. Submit to God. Resist evil.

Sounds easy enough – but when we get into the complications of our lives –

it becomes much more difficult—

especially when we are going through stressful times.-

That’s when envy and bitterness and selfish ambition rear their ugly heads

and we find ourselves trying to make other people fall in line.

We want them to submit to our will – and do what we want them to do.

In all the conflicts over masks and vaccine mandates—I find myself wondering

why, oh why doesn’t everyone see things the way I do

and act the way I want them to act?

Weddings are stressful.

When Stephen and I got married, on the morning of our wedding I lost my car keys.

We were going to be leaving in my car after the wedding

and there was only one set of keys.

I was convinced that Stephen had them.

I sent him several frantic and not very polite messages.

My willfulness –my selfish ambition – it all came out —

this marriage was starting off on rocky ground.

My cool-headed father-in-law located the keys, in **my** raincoat pocket!

Different issues might trigger it,

 but just about all of us have a certain amount of **willfulness** --

 an intense desire for things to go the way we want them to go.

The letter of James was written to a church full of normal human beings:

 people struggling with selfish ambition and envy --

 people who found themselves in disputes and conflicts --

 and wanting things they couldn't have -- cravings at war within them.

James gives wise counsel:

 *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.*

Relinquish our will and open our heart to God's will -- things will go easier.

Draw near to God -- and God will come to us.

This is the way we are to live our lives.

Resist the devil.

People say "The Devil made me do it." – and what we mean is something got into us.

We acted against what we know is right.

We let our appetites, our desires, our greed, our willfulness, our conflicting emotions

 guide our actions.

As Christians, when we were baptized, or confirmed our baptism vows --

 when we joined the church we signed-on to a different guide for our lives.

We said we would submit to God.

Submission does not come easily to any of us -- especially us Americans.

It's in our genes -- it's written into our history --

it's the character of American Exceptionalism that we ***resist*** the idea of submission.

People will say our nation is all about freedom and empowerment.

We know that this has not been true of many Americans –

Native peoples, African Americans, and even people like the *Sobermen*,

who live on the margins,

under the watchful and sometimes not-so-gentle eye of the police. –

But still, the idea that our nation affords everyone the freedom to pursue our dreams –

to work hard and reap the rewards –it’s in our DNA.

And the churches have seen themselves as a vehicle for people to fulfill their dreams:

The Catholic and Lutheran Churches empowered the immigrants

 from Ireland and Germany and Central Europe

 to enter into the mainstream of American life.

The Black Churches empowered former slaves

 to create a community with its own music and aspirations.

The Mormons moved out to Utah and, by becoming a majority religion,

 giving power to its members.

People used to join the Presbyterian or Episcopal churches

 when they wanted to ascent to a higher social status,

 and gain power and respect in the community.

We tell the stories from the Bible about a group of slaves

whom God liberated from Egypt and empowered to become a nation.

We read in the Prophets, how God helped the Jewish people

 forge an identity through exile.

The early church gathered a group of prostitutes, and slaves, and widows,

and orphans, and lepers and raised them into dignity.

Faith has to do with **empowerment**!

 Through community, through education, through shared values,

 through the freedom of Christ's forgiving love,

 we are empowered to live life abundantly.

When we are at the end of the rope, bottom of the barrel, when we've hit a wall -- got nowhere to turn and nowhere to go,

 we need to grab hold of the faith that empowers --

 faith in the God whose strength will get us through.

But faith also has to do with **submission**.

The only real way to be empowered is to submit.

 Every great religious tradition tells us this.

The word Islam *means* "submission" --

 a Muslim is technically, "One who submits to God".

But so is a Christian -- a follower of Christ -- as the old hymn says:

 "perfect submission, perfect delight."

True freedom is achieved only

 when we come to the place where we can set aside our will for God's will.

We will not be empowered -- we will not find courage and strength and hope –

we cannot draw near to God unless we **submit**.

I hesitate to talk about submission, because, as my family will tell you,

I’m not very good at it.

Someone cuts me off on the road, and I’m ready to go after them.

The recording comes on: *“we are experiencing higher call volume than normal,*

 *please stay on the line –you are caller number 27”*

and I’m ready to hang up the phone and give someone a piece of my mind

– no patience.

Covid has not improved things – our refrigerator is on the fritz,

 but it will be two months before they can deliver the new one.

Our car needed servicing

and the dealer said it would be three weeks before they could work us in—sometimes all you can do is submit to the situation and hope for the best—

but I’m not any good at submitting with grace.

I’m not one to look on the bright side – the car is still working . . .

the refrigerator hasn’t completely given up the ghost –

and I can afford a new one.

I should be grateful. Instead, I’m ready to complain and gripe about things –

after all “It’s the squeaky wheel that gets the grease”, isn’t it?

The Bible never said that.

Submission is no easy task. It takes practice. It requires of us -- discipline.

When we want to get in shape --

 we start small -- and we work up to the more intense work-out.

 We start by walking around the block -- then two blocks --

 then jogging around the block -- and so forth.

The same is true when it comes to submitting to God.

We begin in the small decisions of life --

 ●We join a Bible Study on zoom,

when we would have rather watched the ball game.

 ●We agree to help with a Habitat build or deliver food to the foodbank, when we already have a full schedule.

 ●We make a conscious effort to pray for someone,

 even though prayer doesn't come easy to us.

By submitting in the small things, the things that seem insignificant to us --

 we learn the discipline of accepting God's will in *all things*

 and trusting God through the rough times.

These are rough times. The news bombards us with stories which make us anxious.

The earth seems to be shifting under us—and the future . . . worries us.

Last week President Bush said:

 *“A malign force seems at work in our common life*

*that turns every disagreement into an argument,*

*and every argument into a clash of cultures.*

*So much of our politics has become a naked appeal to anger, fear and resentment.*

 *That leaves us worried about our nation and our future together.”*

**“Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.”** It’s **not** a threat.

It’s a promise: A promise for a future, **not** filled with fear and resentment,

**not** colored by envy and dispute, but one infused with mercy and goodness.

I want to say a little about the first Psalm –

also part of the lectionary readings for today.

The first Psalm it sets the tone for all the Psalms. It outlines what’s ahead.

*"Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked…*

*for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
    but the way of the wicked will perish.”*

There were people in my church in Pittsburgh who thought of that biker gang,

*the Sobermen* as wicked. They didn’t know them. They only knew ***of*** them.

They had heard stories about biker gangs.

They knew that there had been drugs and fights and prison in their lives.

I don’t mean to be critical of that congregation,

for they were actually a lot more compassionate and open than many.

But, they were glad that the bikers only attended the AA meetings on Thursday nights,

and didn’t darken the doors of the church on Sunday mornings.

I admit that I was just as glad as my congregation –

because I didn’t want to deal with the conflicts

which would undoubtably have come up

if the two very different groups of people had found themselves

sitting in the pews together. I knew who was paying my salary.

We need to be careful about **who** it is we define as the wicked.

The Psalmist tells us to avoid the **advice** of the wicked,
The Psalmist says don’t take the **path** that sinners tread, or **sit** in the seat of scoffers.

And James says stay away from earthly, unspiritual, devilish **wisdom**.

The Bible does not us into **us** versus **them** – the good guys versus the bad guys.

It warns us to be discerning – and figure out what is wicked and what is righteous –

and then walk in the way that is righteous.

Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.

I wish that I and my church in Pittsburgh had opened our arms wider

 and made a more welcome home for folks like *the Sobermen*.

For wickedness did not reside in the bikers,

but in our own discomfort and difficulty in welcoming them.

We missed a wonderful opportunity for God to draw near to us.

You know how it is . . . when we open our arms to someone who is different –

 in the Bible it’s the proverbial widow and orphan and stranger –

but it also might be someone, who is close to us

but whom we’ve been holding at a distance. . .

When seek out those who have been battered and abused,

when we reach out to people who make us feel “uncomfortable”

we find that we have drawn near to God

and God has drawn near to us.

Let us pray:

Dear God, we give you thanks for the many ways you draw near to us.

Help us to draw near to you. Teach us to submit to your will, and rest in your love,

and give over to you the things we struggle so hard to control.

Help us to trust your power, alone - the power made perfect in weakness.

In all the situations where we are in conflict,

give us perspective to discern your will and courage to do it.

Help us to work for justice and allow you to guide us in the way of peace.

 We pray in the strong name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.