

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer
September 20, 2009
Psalm 1; James 3: 13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9: 30-37
Drawing Near to God

“Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy Place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continuously return. Eternity is at our hearts, pressing upon our time-torn lives, warming us with intimations of an astounding destiny, calling us home unto Itself. Yielding to these persuasions, gladly committing ourselves in body and soul, utterly and completely, to the Light Within, is the beginning of true life. It is a dynamic center, a creative Life that presses to birth within us. It is a Light Within which illumines the face of God and casts new shadows and new glories upon the face of men. It is a seed stirring to life if we do not choke it. It is the Shekinah of the soul, the Presence in the midst. Here is the Slumbering Christ, stirring to be awakened, to become the soul we clothe in earthly form and action. And He is within us all.” (Thomas Kelly, A Testament of Devotion, p. 29).

That’s how Thomas Kelly, a Quaker, begins his spiritual classic, A Testament of Devotion. The spark of the Divine is in us all, he states. The Light Within. The Inner Light. The Divine Presence. It’s within us all.

“[Prayer] is the movement of the heart of a man toward God; a movement that in a sense is within God -- God in the heart sharing its life with God the Creator of all Life. The hunger itself is God, calling to God ... When the hunger in a man’s heart merges with what seems to be the fundamental intent of life, communion with God the Creator of Life is not only possible but urgent. The hunger of the heart, which is a part of the givenness of God, becomes one with the givenness of God as expressed in the world of nature and in human history This hunger may function merely at the level of human striving and enlightened social concern ... In other words, it may not become personal in terms of the devotional response of the individual to Life. Or, it may be a clue to the Father’s house, to the Holy of Holies, wherein the Creator of Life and the King of the Universe has His dwelling place. Prayer is the means by which this clue is pursued. The hunger cannot be separated from God. For many this is what makes any communication between God and man possible. This is the swinging door that no man can shut. This is not to say that the great God of Life is reduced to or squeezed in the hunger of the heart of man, but that the hunger is an expression of the givenness of God. I repeat: it is the trysting place where the God and the soul of man meet, where they stand on a common ground and the wall or partition between them has no status”(Howard Thurman, Disciplines of the Spirit, pp. 95-96).

That’s how Howard Thurman talks about prayer in his spiritual classic, Disciplines of the Spirit. There is a hunger for God in all of us. That hunger can be satisfied in various ways. One way is through prayer.

I begin with these theological statements as a way to underscore what I want to say today about the theme of “drawing near to God.” The life of the spirit is not something for only a

few of us. Practicing spiritual disciplines is not only for those who don't have anything else to do in their lives. Drawing near to God is something all of us can do, and really, what all of us are meant to do.

Can we live our lives without drawing near to God? Yes. Can we live our lives without Bible study, without prayer, without worship, without paying attention to faith development or spiritual growth? Yes, of course. Can we live our lives according to the wisdom of the world? Yes, we can. And we do. Competition. Envy. Selfish ambition. Conflicts. Disputes. Disorder. Wickedness. Does a day go about without some version of these examples of earthly wisdom getting lived out among us? We live daily with such things, with such desires, with such ways of understanding, with such pursuits. And while we may convince ourselves that such pursuits lead to happiness, we find out over and over again that they do not. Having more stuff doesn't make us happier. Being considered more important than someone else doesn't make us happier. Getting our way on things doesn't make us happier. Because there's always more stuff to be had. There's always someone new coming along to challenge our authority or our place at the top. Envy and selfish-ambition are desires that can never be satisfied. And the disorder and wickedness those desires create are not easily controlled. Just read the morning paper. Just watch the television. Just look at your own community – maybe even within your own family – maybe even within your own church -- maybe even within your own life.

But it can be different. That's what the psalmist, and James, and Mark all tell us in our Scripture readings for today. There is another way to live. There is another kind of wisdom to follow. "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers, but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night," declares the psalmist. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," summarizes Jesus. "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you," instructs James.

Another preacher suggests looking at this in terms of contentment: "Think about those agitated disciples. They were anything but content. Jesus wanted them to be content, not in the sense of losing all the starch in their spines, but in the sense of having priorities that are lined up with the priorities of God. I think of it in terms of being tilted right. Tilted toward God. Getting in the groove -- that is contentmentThere is nothing that gives more meaning to life than digging deep and reaching for the best that is in us. That is what the disciples ended up doing with their lives." (Joanna Adams, "Ambition", www.goodpreacher.com).

Being tilted toward God. Drawing near to God -- and not away from God. That's what brings contentment. That's what yields a fruitful harvest in our lives. But not if we argue about what it means to draw near to God, or about the best way to draw near to God. The disciples were close to Jesus, you know. But they still fussed over who was most important. And fussing affects the closeness, doesn't it? If in my drawing near to God I alienate those who are with me, how near to God am I really going to get?

A certain Christian believer suffering from constant headaches went to see his doctor. "Doctor, I don't know why I keep getting these awful headaches. "I don't drink like so many others do. I don't smoke like so many others do. I don't run around at night like so many others do. I don't overeat like so many others do. I don't..."The doctor interrupted at this

point. “Tell me”, she said, “this pain in the head you complain of, is it a sharp, shooting kind of pain?” “Yes,” the patient replied, “that describes it perfectly. A sharp, shooting kind of pain!”. The doctor then made her diagnosis: “Simple, she said, “your problem is that you have your halo on too tight. All you need to do is loosen it a bit.”

What is the doctor telling the man? To go out and drink and smoke and run around ? Or, to stop thinking that because he refrains from those behaviors he’s better than everyone else?

Drawing near to God isn’t about completing some check list of activities. It’s not about putting ourselves on some moral or spiritual high horse, either. It’s about reaching that inner light of God within ourselves. It’s about listening to that divine voice that speaks to us through the hunger of our heart. It’s about aligning ourselves with the priorities of God, and not with our own selfish cravings and ambitions. It’s about following the wisdom from above – which is, as James describes it, first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.”

And how we do that is as varied as everything else about us. Some of us draw near to God through nature. Some through intellectual stimulation. Some through social action. Some through traditional symbols and rituals. Some through taking care of others. Some through our physical senses. In his book, Sacred Pathways, author Gary Thomas identifies 9 ways that people typically draw near to God. I’m not sure the number of pathways matters so much, or even that he’s identified them all -- but his point that different people are drawn to God through different means is well taken, I think. And he’s not talking about different religions, by the way. He’s actually talking about Christians – and how as Christians we approach God by different pathways. One of the problems, he says, is that we tend to think there’s a one-size fits-all spiritual program we’re all supposed to follow. Another problem is that even if we understand there are different pathways we can be so used to the one we know best that we lose our interest in following it. Here are some things he says:

I’ve found that many people face the same dilemma in their walk with God. Their love for God has not dimmed; they’ve just fallen into a soul-numbing rut. Their devotions seem like nothing more than shadows of what they’ve been doing for years. They’ve been involved in the same ministry for so long they could practically do it in their sleep. It seems as if nobody in their small groups has had an original thought for three years. They finally wake up one morning and ask, “Is this really all there is to knowing God?” (Gary Thomas, Sacred Pathways, Zondervan , 1996, p. 15).

Have you ever felt that way? When it comes to paying attention to your inner devotional life are you doing the same things at 60 that you did at 6? Or maybe you’ve sort of stopped paying attention to that inner life? It’s easy to do -- there are plenty of distractions, plenty of other voices, plenty of other activities. So many that even 30 minutes a day alone with God can seem impossible. And especially if we have some pre-conceived notion of what that time alone with God should look like. Not every one approaches God through silent meditation. Some do, but not everyone. Nor does everyone sense God’s presence while sitting by someone’s hospital bedside. Some do – but not everyone. What he does in his book is invite his readers to identify their own predisposition for relating to God, which he calls our predominant spiritual temperament. When that temperament has been identified, then readers are encouraged to draw near to God in ways match those temperaments. I can’t

reproduce his inventory of spiritual temperaments without violating copyright laws – but I can share these examples with you. Listen and if you want, take note of your own responses. Do you feel closest to God when you're out-of doors? Do you feel cut off if you have to spend too much time indoors, listening to speakers or singing songs? If your answer is a strong yes, then you probably have a naturalist temperament and you love God in the out of doors. Do you feel closest to God when you're alone? Would you describe your faith as more "internal" than external? If so, then you're an ascetic, and you love God in solitude and simplicity. Do you feel closest to God when you see God in the needy, the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned? Do you sense God's power when you're counseling a friend who's lost a job, preparing meals for a family in need, or spending a week at an orphanage in Mexico? Strong yeses to these situations suggest you have a care giving temperament and that you seek loving God by loving others. Again, I can't quote them all. The point is that each of us has one or more temperaments that fit us more closely than the others, and that by following those pathways that are more in line with our own temperament, we'll develop a stronger, more meaningful spiritual life. Why try drawing near to God through nature if you really don't enjoy being outside? Or why force yourself onto an intellectual pathway if you're really a person who enjoys making things with your hands? No one pathway is better than the others. And no one pathway all by itself is enough either. Each of us is a mixture of temperaments — and temperaments can change over the course of our lives as well.

After describing the nine pathways, and encouraging his readers to discover the pathways that most fit their spiritual temperaments, he offers this example and insight: "I've known Christians who have committed their lives to following Christ at about the same time; but the influence this commitment had on their lives soon became markedly different. One lived a life of self-absorption. Christianity made sense, but it became almost a convenience -- no need to take it too seriously or to reorder one's life around it. The other person, however, took a different approach. She found ways to make Bible study a regular part of her life. She kept her prayer life fresh and varied. New attributes came to the forefront, and before she knew it, people were asking her for advice and counseling Both planted a spiritual garden, but only one tended. Some of us live with the mistaken impression that our faith needs only to be planted, not tended. Becoming a mature Christian, some think, is like becoming six feet tall – it either happens or it doesn't." (p. 216).

Tending our faith -- that's what the focus this month on intentional faith development and spiritual growth is all about. Drawing near to God –through prayer, through Bible study, through faith-sharing, through worship, through mission and outreach, through music, through art, through the nature, through fasting, through care-giving, through silence, through praise and celebration -- through any pathway that leads us to a deeper, fuller, more joyful connection with the Divine presence in our lives and in the world – well, that's what we are all invited to do. Jesus' disciples argued among themselves. James' congregation was experiencing conflict within itself. The psalmist reminds us that the wicked are like chaff in the wind. There is another way. Pay attention, these examples tell us. Draw near to God, and experience what can't be experienced otherwise. Genuine happiness. Lasting contentment. Abiding joy. Abundant and eternal life. The life that really is life. Amen.

