

“Draw!”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
August 15, 2021¹

- Deuteronomy 28:1-6, 8-10
- James 4:8a

Whether it was Gary Cooper in “High Noon,” or Clint Eastwood in “A Fistful of Dollars,” or Luke Perry in “A Gunfighter’s Pledge,” you’ve probably seen one of those classic showdowns in a Hollywood western where the good guy in the white hat and the bad guy in the black hat stand at a distance, staring down one another, their right hand hovering above a holstered six-shooter. Each one is waiting for the other to make the first move.

This morning’s scripture reading – just one verse, really – seems to describe a standoff between humankind and God, but a standoff with an obviously different purpose: it’s as though God is off in the distance poised to bestow a blessing upon us, but is waiting for us to make the first move. James the epistle writer captured the scene with these words: “Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.”²

That’s like one of those postulates you learned about in school: “If-Then.” Applied to this verse, it becomes “IF you draw near to God, THEN God will draw near to you.” That “If-Then” dynamic reminds me of how one of my schoolteachers explained Newton’s Third Law of Motion that proposed, “For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.”

She said that when you jump into the air and move away from the earth, the earth actually also moves away from you. Then, as the earth’s gravity draws you back toward the ground, the gravity created by your body mass also draws the earth back toward you. Granted, the movement of the earth is unimaginably small even compared to the few inches of distance you cover. But it’s a scientific fact: if you pull away from the earth, it pulls away from you. Conversely, when you draw near the earth, it draws near to you.

In a way, that also captures the image James had in mind when he thought about how God responds to our desire to have a relationship with God. By our drawing near to God, God will choose to draw near to us.

But I’ll be honest. In my mind, I find myself asking, “Hey, if God is so wonderful and loving and generous, how come God waits for us to make the first move? If God

¹ Modified from a sermon originally preached September 21, 2003

² James 4:8

really wanted us to give our lives in love and service to God, then why doesn't God just work some miracle, hit us over the head with some heavenly wand, and magically make us into dedicated servants? Why does God wait for us to make the first move, to declare and then demonstrate our love and desire to be faithful?"

I think it's a fair question. Rightfully we have a pretty high opinion of God as a generous and forgiving deity, but in this respect, God seems a little immature and childish—almost an attitude of “Huh-uh, you go first!”

As best as I can figure, the explanation is that God wants our love to be authentic. After all, if God wanted coerced obedience, God could have it—God could do anything God wants. But God knows that obedience generates a sense of joy only if it is voluntary and not forced. Let me paint this picture to explain what I mean.

Your family sets out on a road trip driving out of state. You've arranged to stop for the night at the home of an aunt you've not seen since before your daughter was born. When you arrive, you all get out of the car and walk up to the front door. Your aunt comes out on the porch to greet you. She squeals, “Well, look at that cute daughter of yours! Come here, honey, and give your auntie a kiss!” Your toddler has been holding your hand, but at the sight of this adult stranger, she hugs your leg for protection.

What do you do? You could pry her off of your leg, drag her up the steps, push her into the clutches of your aunt and force her to give that intimidating stranger a hug and kiss.... But really, how affectionate is that forced embrace going to be?

Or you could let your daughter cower behind you as you receive your aunt's warm, loving embrace. In time, on her own, your daughter would warm up to the stranger. She'd develop her own desire to express and receive affection from your aunt.

That's how God wants to receive our love: as a learned, genuine expression of our respect and affection for who God is. God does not want to coerce us to show love we don't really feel or understand. So God sits back and waits, expectantly, hopeful, longing for us to make that first step in drawing near to God. Then, with even the smallest sign that we're seeking God, God draws near to us.

How do we draw near to God? One way is through the prayer of confession we offer up each week as a part of our customary worship experience. Weekly confession isn't intended to make us feel like slime balls or to grind our egos into the dirt. As a group we confess or admit before God to our human nature's imperfection. Acknowledging our sinfulness is a way of remembering that only God is perfect. If God alone is perfect, then we absolutely must trust and rely on God to pull us up and dust us off so we can try again to live with the obedience of Jesus. By helping us see how far

we fall short of the goodness of God, confession sets the stage for us to draw near to God so God can draw near to us.

Another way you can draw near to God is through acts of kindness and service. I read a wonderful story about a woman who showed the blessing of forgiveness in a truly amazing way. I'm going to save the story for some other time, but the author said that the woman was able to forgive a seemingly unforgivable situation because she had steeped herself in "a lifetime of faithful Christian living, [a] slow and almost imperceptible development of habits of feeling, thinking and living shaped by the love of Christ."³ Habitual acts of selfless service and kindness to others mold your spirit so you more closely conform to the model life of Jesus. Acts of kindness move you toward God, and God draws near to you.

Most simply, though, you draw near to God because, by God's grace, you see the opportunity and you accept it. You know that God is there... God is here. You know that because you have the ability to be aware of yourself and aware of others, awareness that could only come from something or Someone greater than all that you can imagine. The majesty of a God whose very words spoke into existence all that is... *that* majestic God is waiting to draw close to you!

Friends, the good news today is this: Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.

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³ "St. Jeanette" by L. Gregory Jones in *The Christian Century*, September 20, 2003, 37