

James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a “Whatever Happened to Restraint?” Rev. Janet Chapman 9/23/18

I spent the last 24 hours with a group of women from Northern California-Nevada on a spiritual retreat focused on prayer. It was good to be reminded that prayer can be understood in a much broader context than previously thought and to pay attention to the content of our prayers. What are the things that make up our prayers? There once was a church who held regularly prayer meetings where the content and practice of prayer became questionable. A visitor retells the story of attending one of the prayer groups at the invitation of one of the members. He recalls that during the prayer meeting, not one prayer was offered. Instead, they spent the time counting and listing all the answers to prayer. There was no time for drawing near to God, just a concerted effort to tally up the answers to prayer. These included a woman who shared that God answered her prayer by making sure she got a mink stole. From another came the proclamation that he finally got that brand new luggage he wanted. Another was taking a trip to Hawaii. There was a young woman who had gotten a date with Mike and that was definitely an answer to prayer as she recounted. And so it went, a list of luxurious things. Then the leader turned to the visitor and asked, “Would you like to add to our list?” He responded, “I have nothing to add to your list.” “Well, don’t you believe in prayer?” she remarked. “After all, Jesus said, ‘Whatever you ask in my name, you’ll get it.’” The visitor just shook his head. The leader joyfully announced, “We now have had 321 answers to prayer and so this prayer meeting is now adjourned,” and there was applause around the room. As the group left, the visitor reflected to no one in particular, “There was no prayer here.”

In James 4, verse 3, the author writes, “Some of you ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures...” In other words, you are

praying for things that will give you pleasure and you are not going to get that. This passage is an encouragement towards restraint, an invitation to take a pause, to slow down for the yellow light rather than barreling forward. For James, one of the primary functions of faith is the exercise of restraint, as he battles the church of his time which has become unrestrained in its seeking of pleasures and things. For we who live in a society that is centered on self-gratification, often at the expense of others, James' words sound alien and countercultural at best. Restraint is a foreign, negative word when instant gratification appears to be a necessity. Consider that TV commercial promoting a fully loaded van. It begins with a father, gifted and strong, finishing up construction on a family treehouse in the back yard. The dad runs to find his kids and they are in the van playing cards. When the dad invites them to come see his creation, they ask if the tree house has leather seats, Wi-fi, Sirius XM, Xbox connections and screen, MP3, and amazing speakers, among other things? Is this what we have come to? Is it any wonder that folks, gifted and strong, have a hard time drawing near to God? There are so many things that get in the way.

Maxie Dunnam tells a story of a couple who were driving on a highway and got caught behind a slow-moving vehicle. The driver in front of them was a young man and there was a young woman cuddled very close to him, kissing him lightly on the cheek and rubbing his face. Even though it was dangerous, he would turn quickly and give her a quick kiss as well. They didn't seem to be in any hurry and it was impossible to pass on the windy two-lane road, so the older couple just sat back and began to talk as they followed the car. The woman looked across at her husband, then looked ahead at the young couple and asked, "Why don't we sit together

like that anymore?” To which he responded with a smile, “I haven’t moved.” When drawing closer to God, there is a great deal that gets in our way, and God isn’t the one who has moved.

Draw near to God, James encourages. In order to do so, practice restraint when encountering forces like selfish ambition, lies, boastfulness, pride, devilish attitudes, and bitter envy. Frederick Buechner says “envy is the consuming desire to have everybody else as unsuccessful as you are.” The choice of such words tells us that James is dealing with some pretty difficult folks, as Fred Craddock points out. Some of these people include those who are quite spiritual, gifted and strong individuals. Yet, they are using prayer and faith in inappropriate ways, like in that so-called prayer meeting. Another group includes those who look around at others and see things they want, things they envy and grow bitter about. Therefore, tension and division develop in the life of the congregation between the haves and the have nots. The third group is a part of the have nots, who go a step further and commit violence in order to get what they want. After all, it is only so long that you can press your nose against the window looking at the joyful things inside and have somebody say to you, “You are poor, so you can’t have that.” After awhile, you take a brick, shatter the window, and take it. One can only stand at a border wall, a security fence so long, looking through the cracks to what is on the other side, before they too begin to crack. James encourages restraint to those who are looking in, those who seek what they can’t have and gain it by violence. He says to those who envy, use restraint, to those who pray for pleasurable things, slow down at the light.

However, Craddock dares to ask what would James say if he were talking to people who could afford to have these things? What would he say to people who want, and actually can have, what they want? They can afford it, we can afford it. “Did you say you are building a

trophy house worth \$1.3 million – just you and your spouse?” “Well, we can afford it.” “You mean you are going to travel around the world for a month?” “Well, we can afford it.” What would James say? We know what he says to those who cannot afford it – restraint. But what does he say to those who can afford it? Craddock admits he doesn’t know for sure, but if you read the entire letter of James, one can pretty well guess what he’d say. James would say, “You can’t afford it.” A whole long walk-in closet filled with clothes? As long as there is anybody without clothing, you can’t afford it. All that food overflowing in your pantry and you can’t begin to eat it, so where does it go? With hunger everywhere, you can’t afford it. A \$1.3 million dollar trophy house, when brothers and sisters are sleeping in cardboard boxes in downtown cities? No, you just can’t afford it. I don’t care how much you have. As long as there is a limit to our natural resources, we can’t afford it. A limit to the trees, flowers and grass, we just can’t afford it.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “I don’t exercise all my rights. I don’t exercise all my freedoms. I’m free to do this and have that. I’m free to be this and to be that. But I don’t exercise all of them. I exercise restraint because I am under divine restraint. There are things I have to do.” And we cringe – how we hate that phrase “I have to do this,” “You have to do this.” That divine necessity that spreads its broad wings over our place in this world and says, “You have to do this.” I wonder if you have been to those social gatherings where people are talking and eating little finger sandwiches and wondering about when they are really going to eat? Pleasantries are being exchanged and then somebody walks in the room. “Who’s that?” Everybody turns and says, “Oh that’s Barbara Harris.” “Who?” “Barbara Harris, surely you have read about her. She’s a woman of means and she’s gifted and strong. You know what

she does? She spends her time working with police departments to improve the conditions of children and the mentally ill who are put in jails. She helps with legal resources and defense, on her own, with her own money." "Is she paid?" "No, she pays all her own expenses." Someone goes over to ask her why, why are you doing this? You know what she says? "I have to. Somebody has to do it." And we recognize that Barbara understands better than most about prayer, about living a life of restraint. Maybe, just maybe, she has found the key to achievement, the key to freedom, and the key to true joy. That key lies in feeling the burden, the wonderful burden of divine restraint. "I have to do it," we say. And by doing so, we draw near to God as God draws nearer to us.