**Sermon Proper 20B**

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**Text:** *Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hearts… (James 4:5-10)*

God’s Word calls sinners to repentance. Now, it is a common misconception that Christians are outside the category of sinners – both within and without the Church this false idea exists. St. James wrote in chapter three of his Epistle that “we all stumble in many ways” (Jas 3:2); and today, in chapter four, he addresses members of the Church as “sinners” and “double-minded” (4:8); he is willing to acknowledge “quarrels” and “contentions” among believers, even calling them murderers and adulterers (vv. 1-4). This is shocking language. Did not James open his Epistle by saying that God has “brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures”? (1:18) He treats sinners yet as Christians, calling them to repentance once again.

How can this be? In the first place, we wrestle with the reality that all human beings, even baptized Christians, maintain the corruption of original sin. Self-interest marks even the best of our seemingly good works (and so much, therefore, for the notion that we earn grace by works. “There is not difference,” St. Paul writes in Romans, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:23-24). It is not that we are Christians because we are good people; the definition of a Christians is someone in Christ. True, good works follow faith – but only through faith; Christ Jesus said to his disciples, “apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) No ground for boasting remains.

This principle applies not only to the fruits of faith, but also to repentance itself. Jesus said a little later to his disciples, in John, that he would send the Holy Spirit; and that the Holy Spirit would “convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (16:8). A relationship with the triune God is necessary for a full consciousness of sin, after all; it is the way of nonbelievers to deny their sinfulness, or as is the fashion today, to exult in it. So James counters with the thesis of today’s Epistle: “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” (Jas 4:6) And always practical, he shows how repentance works itself out. “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” (7-8)

Only those, again, already in a relationship to God as beloved sons and daughters can “draw near”, that is, take refuge in his tender loving care. It is true that, as we approach a righteous God, our sinfulness comes into fuller relief. This produces what Paul calls “godly sorrow” in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians: “For godly grief produces repentance that leads to salvation without regret” (2 Cor 7:10). James likewise calls the Church to repentance, in the way of turning her “laughter” to “mourning” and “joy” to “gloom” (Jas 4:9). “Cleanse your hands,” etc.

This is not to mean that we must be dour and refuse the many gifts of life given by our Creator. Rather, it is brokenness over sin which leads to rejoicing. For it is one thing to be thankful and full of praise to our Father Almighty, who “richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life.” It is quite another, amazing thing, to realize that God has “redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sin, from death, and the power of the devil”. This is the Gospel, a mystery into which St. Peter says the angels in heaven “long to look” (1 Pet 1:12). St. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote that, while God provided succour for our need, he also preserved the angels from such need. Their bliss is unending; ours comes only after repentance.

To inspire repentance God has given us plenty Psalms, called Penitential Psalms. The most used include the Thirty-Second Psalm: “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.” (Ps 32:1-2). And then there is the Fifty-First Psalm, “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice.” (Ps 51:7-8) King David climaxes in this familiar verse: “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.” All this joy that proceeds from restoration from brokenness stands in the background of James’s stern warning. “Humble yourselves before the Lord,” he writes in conclusion, “and he will exalt you.” (Jas 4:10)

We close with these words of our Lord Jesus: “Blessed are those,” “Happy are those who mourn; for they shall be comforted. Happy are the meek, for they shall be comforted. Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; for they shall be filled.” (Matt 5:4-6)