

Coram Deo
Soli Deo Gloria, Soli Deo Gracia, Soli Scriptura
Agnus Dei, Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi
Deo Volente
Sermon Preach at Stouffville United Church
By the Rev. Capt. Dr. John S. Niles MSM CD

“Pressure Point- When things are Upside Down.”

Fifth Sermon Series on Book of James: “Pressure Points”

February 4, 2024

James 1:1-12

⁹ Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, ¹⁰ but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away. ¹¹ For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xh4kO7ED1k>

“He who learns must suffer.
And even in our sleep,
 pain
 which cannot forget
 falls
drop by drop upon the heart,
 until,
in our own despair,
 against our will,
 comes wisdom
through the awful grace of God.”

AESCHYLUS (*Agamemnon* 179-183)

I first heard these haunting words written by Aeschylus when I was watching the news with my mother after Martin Luther King was assassinated and Robert Kennedy come to calm the crowds in April of 1968. He reminded them of the loss of his Brother John who too was assassinated five years earlier and said he found comfort in that difficult time as he read and reflected on the words of Aeschylus.

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The awful grace of God comes in advance of the amazing grace of God. The awful grace of God is the experience of wisdom that is born out of painful encounters and occurrence. It is learning through the school of hard knocks. It is a grace that never gives up until its purpose of change and redemption is complete and the person can then experience the amazing grace of God.

It is a grace that Aeschylus describes when he says, it falls drop by drop upon the heart until in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.”

When Aeschylus wrote these words some 525 years before the birth of Jesus. He was the father of Greek tragedy and, in play, "*Seven Against Thebes*," laid the burden of human evil at the feet of human beings. Acts of wickedness, he suggested, arise from ambition, greed, and human frailty.

James was trying to encourage the believers of his day who were going through the same acts of wickedness at a time when things seemed upside down.

There is a text in the 17th chapter of Acts verse 6 where the enemies of Paul and Silas, after they had come to speak about Jesus, attacked them and they ran for their lives to Jason's house who sheltered them.

After they left, a crowd came and dragged Jason out and said of them that “these were the men that turned the world upside down.”

G K Chesterton said when he thought of that statement that “by turning the world upside down they turned the world right side up”

How do we turn what is seemingly upside down right side up? James said,
⁹ *Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation,* ¹⁰ *but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away.* ¹¹ *For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits.*”

A few years ago Bill Marr was the host of a program called *Politically Incorrect*- the premise for the program was to tout what was or should be politically correct.

The problem with political correctness is that as time passes what was once politically correct soon becomes politically incorrect- and the result was that because of Bill Marrs correct incorrectness – that later became actually incorrect - his show was cancelled for being too politically incorrect.

The parents of an eighteen-year-old daughter received a text from her while she was away in first year of University:

Dear Mom and Dad,

I just thought I'd drop you a note to let you know what's going on with me. I've fallen in love with a guy named Blaze. He's a really neat guy, but he quit high school a few years

ago to get married. That didn't work out, so he got a divorce last year. We've been going out for several weeks, and we're thinking about getting married in the fall. Until then, I've decided to move into his apartment. I think I might be pregnant. Oh yeah, I dropped out of school last week so that I could get a job to help support Blaze. I'm hoping I'll be able to finish university after we get married.

A few minutes later she texted again,

Mom and Dad, I just wanted you to know that everything I've written so far in this text is a lie. None of it is true.

But Mom and Dad, it is true that I got a C in English and a D in Math. And it's also true that I need some more money. Could you please send me a hundred dollars?

Thanks a bunch.

Love Julie

She received a check in the mail from her parents two days later.

dailywisdom.gospelcom.net/archives/old/1996/02/dw-02-26-96.html

I

We turn what is seemingly upside down, right side up, by **being wise enough to ask for help**. James was reminding everyone in that statement that the way up is down. ⁹ *Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation,* ¹⁰ *but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away.* ¹¹ *For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits."*

So one of the marks of humility is recognizing your limits, accepting the fact that there are matters beyond your ability and capacity and being willing to ask for help.

When my wife and I were first married, we each had expectations of each other and given my wife's father was an engineer and brother an electrical engineer who could fix anything she thought I did to. It causes no end of problems. My father was a soldier and mother a reservist and administrative secretary. I could type sixty words a minute and shoot a bull's eye at 100 yards and at the time we met I was a social worker; I could fix people but couldn't fix a sink to save my life.

It was only after we stopped looking at each other's limitations and working from our strengths get sorted out. And then being willing to ask for help.

It was about five years after we were married that Liane finally got me to fix the sink or replace it. There was no YouTube then to help you step by step to do it. And given I had only three tools a wrench, screwdriver and a sledgehammer. It was an easy, decision on my part, just as she and her mom were going to do some shopping she popped her head in to see how I was doing, just as I took the first swing with the sledgehammer.

Now, in my defense, when they got back, I had a whole new counter and sink installed, and it lasted 10 years, but the image of my swinging a sledgehammer saved me from ever having to fix anything again for the next 33 years. It was after that she called a plumber.

Thomas Dorsey was a black jazz musician from Atlanta who was known in the early 1920's for the suggestive lyrics he combined with original music and a wild life. Then God touched his life and in 1926 he began to write spiritual music. In 1932 times were hard for Dorsey as they were for nearly everyone trying to survive the depression. The most difficult night of his life came one night in St. Louis when he received a telegram telling him that his pregnant wife had suddenly died. Dorsey was filled with grief and his faith was shaken, but instead of wallowing in self-pity, he expressed his agony the only way he knew how. He wrote this song:

Precious Lord, take my hand, Lead me on, let me stand.
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through storm, through night, Lead me on to the light;
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.
When my way grows drear, Precious Lord linger near.
When my life is almost gone; Hear my cry, hear my call,
Hold my hand lest I fall. Take my hand Precious Lord, lead me home.

In spite of Dorsey's checkered past he experienced God's presence during that crises because he was wise enough to seek help. That song which came out of his pain and grief has comforted and challenged thousands of people since then because if we are honest, most of us have had a moment, or two or three when God's presence was all that could get us through.

II

We turn what is seemingly upside down, right side up, by being wise enough to ask for help, and **humble enough to accept it.**

Our value isn't found in some external source – like wealth but from the Eternal source.

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It was reminiscent of John the Baptist saying, *“Every valley will be exalted and every mountain will be brought low...”*

In a world that can be upside down, we as believers find out strength in Christ.

James was telling both those of wealth and those without it, wealth won't help them through the times they were doing through. How they react to this will. It required an attitude adjustment which speaks to a state of being.

Their external circumstances of wealth or lack thereof, will can change, yet how they approach their external circumstances with belief or doubt will impact them for better or worse.

Circumstances can change. Circumstances *will* change.

You have value, you have worth, you have purpose, and you have significance because you are a child of God. And though there are circumstances that are beyond our control; how we respond to the situations and circumstances most certainly are within our control. And have a lot

to do with our ability to come through them or not, to become better or bitter, to be encouraged or discouraged by them.

Leonard Bernstein was once asked which instrument was the most difficult to play. He thought for a moment and then replied, "The second fiddle. I can get plenty of first violinists, but to find someone who can play the second fiddle with enthusiasm - that's a problem. And if we have no second fiddle, we have no harmony." (elbourne.org)

III

We turn what is seemingly upside down, right side up, by being wise enough to ask for help, and humble enough to accept it and finally, **courageous enough to use it** – to fix things.

J. M. Barrie said, the author and playwright who wrote Peter Pan said, "We are all failures - at least, all the best of us are."

A person dialed a wrong number and got the following recording: "I am not available right now, but thank you for caring enough to call. I am making some changes in my life. Please leave a message after the beep. If I do not return your call, **you** are one of the changes."

James wanted us to be believers in ourselves but most of all in God - for what has the doubter ever done – but doubt. The doubter has never discovered a revolutionary product or invented a new design. The doubter has never created a plan for the future or a manufactured a mechanism that could change the world. All they've done is doubt those who eventually did.

It isn't the critic or the cynic; the doubter or the nay-sayer but the believer and the dreamer that sees and foresees. It is the leader and the organizer and believers that does and develops.

It is the dreamer and believer that sees the two words hidden within the one-word *Life* – the two words *If* and *I* and who refuse to doubt but chose to believe that

If I decide...

If I dream...

If I believe...life can truly be beautiful.

You think about that. Amen.