



northminster presbyterian church

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SCRIPTURE: James 3:14-4:8 Mark 9:30-37

SERMON: Nearness And Directness (Rev. Dr. Jim Simpson)

Nearness and Directness. In the lives of many of us today there is nothing that defines Nearness and Directness more than our cell phones. And believe it or not, they are about to get even nearer and more direct! Sprint Nextel has announced plans to deliver short commercials and other ads on its phones. The speculation is that users won't be subjected to the ads, which will range from tiny banners to full-screen video clips, when they make a voice call or send a text messages. But if you download a ring tone, it may well come with an ad for a forthcoming TV show. Use a Sprint city guide or map service, and you might also get an ad for a local hotel or restaurant. The biggest target group for this program is to be business travelers who are somewhat tethered to their cell phones. In the future increasingly the target will be 18-24-year-olds, the demographic all advertisers seek. Nearness and Directness from your cell phone.

Nearness and Directness are a pair of concepts found in the book, "Faithshaping" by author Stephen D. Jones. He writes specifically for those engaged in church youth ministry. He argues, very convincingly, that both *Nearness and Directness* must be practiced by anyone who wishes to nurture faith in young people. I believe he is absolutely correct and moreover I would like to extend these two concepts and apply them not only to youth ministry, but to our total ministry, to our entire activity as a church family. Rightly viewed, Nearness and Directness is exactly what James had in mind when he wrote the words we heard earlier, "Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you."

Both *Nearness and Directness* are needed to help each of us face the challenge of living our faith faithfully. We need people *near* to us to support us as we face new things, to encourage us when we get down, to teach us about what it means for us to live as friends and followers of Jesus. We need people *near* to us to forgive us when we screw up, to comfort us and console us when we face difficulties. We really need people *near* to us. But we also need these people, the people *near* to us to be *direct* with us if and when we wander off on our own. We need people who will be *direct* with us to steer us away from the whisky bottle or the medicine cabinet, people who be direct, who will get in our face to remind us of the vows and promises we have made, people who will explain to us over and over again, clearly and simply and honestly the claim that God has on our lives and on our living.

To offer such nearness and directness to, with and for each other, and for all of us, requires that we all are *keepin' on, keepin' on* in the walk of faith. *Keepin' on, keepin' on* by drawing near to God, so that God will draw near to us. To cultivate Nearness and Directness requires that we run the race of faith with perseverance. It is easy, relatively speaking to be *keepin' on, keepin' on* at the start of the race; also it is a bit easier to keep *keepin' on, keepin' on* as we approach the finish line. But it is in the long stretch, when we face some hills that we need to be *keeping on, keepin' on*. Between the excitement of the start and before the relief of the finish the end, this is where we need to persevere with constancy and consistency.

Nearness and Directness will result as we practice our faith. I use the term "practice" in this context to describe the acts of a community, rather than in the sense of acts of preparation in the build-up to some game. Christian practices identify us as people of faith, as followers of Jesus Christ, at the same time these practices, as we practice them, as we live them, mold us and form us into the people who belong to our Lord, who belong to His Church. Christian practices mark us out as, and make us into, Jesus' followers. Our salvation comes by grace through faith, not through practice but Christian practices, our response to God are the means of grace by which God strengthens us individually and corporately so that we can live faithfully.

The practices of our faith involves the following: participating actively in worship, celebrating the sacraments, praying, reading and applying the Scriptures in our daily living, maintaining fellowship together in the church community, encouraging, forgiving, giving, serving, sharing. In our over-hyped culture, the very ordinariness of these Christian practices can make them easy to overlook. These practices are of course very much the back and forth of our life; they are the give and take of the rituals that happen around the family dinner table or around the communion table; they are the ongoing activities that subtly shape us into people who come to bear a family resemblance – a resemblance to our Lord. Through such practices we give our attention, our full attention, to God! The practices of our faith help align our steps with God's and, in so doing, create holy ripples that radiate far beyond the church.

The practices of our faith, expressing and nurtured by *Nearness and Directness* requires that we hang in there with one another, with God, with all God's people, *Nearness and Directness* means continuing to do the routine things so that our lives will be routinely with God. Such *Nearness and Directness* are a direct challenge to all ideas of instant gratification, to the idea of, "do the dew, thrill-a-minute fun". *Nearness and Directness* involves the challenge of keep on keepin' building bridges to enable all people to move ahead in their faith experience.

The story is told of someone who got very near and was very direct to Michael Jordan during his prime as a basketball player. Observing Jordan shooting hoops before a game this guy said, "Michael, I wish I could shoot like you." to which Jordan looks at him and says, "No you don't. If you did, you would be out here on the court twelve hours a day practicing." *Keepin' on, keepin' on* in our faith does not mean that we will immediately get it all, sacrifice is still required. Our prayers will always be better and on target when we begin, "Lord, what do YOU want from me?" Such a prayer will almost inevitably move us forward as opposed to prayers that are more fully focused on what we need!

Back to Jones and his focus on youth ministry for just a moment. Nearness, he says, requires that youth see how much faith is prized by the important adults around them.

But along with *nearness* there needs to be *directness* with youth. Directness occurs as young people are intentionally asked to write a new chapter in their faith story. Such Directness means frank questions and discussions about the central meaning and significance of claiming the faith for themselves. Directness will include occasions when worship is intimate, when prayer touches our hearts, when service to others opens our eyes to a new and fuller truth. Directness happens when either intentionally or spontaneously youth are helped to address their own questions of faith. Directness occurs whenever anyone shares their own faith story.

By virtue of the fact that you're here for worship this morning, you are showing your desire for *Nearness and Directness* with Jesus. By virtue of the fact that you're here this morning, you are showing your desire to take a serious look at that pathway that Jesus has for us to follow. You are here because you sense a connection here, with people, with the people around you, with the people who together are the family that is Northminster Presbyterian Church. Being able to experience that nearness makes it possible for you to experience directness to and with God, and to and with this community of faith.

My friends, keep on, keeping on, saying your, "YES!" to Jesus. Keep on living your faith in all aspects of your lives. Keep on practicing your faith, let your life be marked out as a life lived for Christ. At the same time as saying "Yes" to Jesus, we also need to be saying "No" to everything in this world that tries to take us away from Jesus. In your life, can you point to something to which you have said 'goodbye' so you can follow Jesus? As you look at your life, are you able to identify a path from which you have turned away from so you can follow the path that Jesus has for you? As you look at your life, are the things inside of you to which you know you need to say "goodbye" to best follow Jesus, but you haven't yet done so? Now would be a great time, to accept God's help and say a profound "goodbye" to whatever it is that holds you back from living for Jesus. *Nearness and Directness* - the never-ending story. Say yes to Jesus. *Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you!* **Amen.**

James 3:14-4:8

14But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. 15Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. 16For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of

every kind. **17**But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. **18**And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

1Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? **2**You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. **3**You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. **4**Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. **5**Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, "God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? **6**But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." **7**Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. **8**Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Mark 9:30-37

30They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; **31**for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." **32**But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. **33**Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" **34**But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. **35**He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." **36**Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, **37**"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

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