

“Prayer”
James 5:13-20
Pollocksville Presbyterian Church
8.1.21
Sermon #109

James 5:13-20 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹³ If any of you are suffering, they should pray. If any of you are happy, they should sing. ¹⁴ If any of you are sick, they should call for the elders of the church, and the elders should pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ Prayer that comes from faith will heal the sick, for the Lord will restore them to health. And if they have sinned, they will be forgiven. ¹⁶ For this reason, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous person is powerful in what it can achieve. ¹⁷ Elijah was a person just like us. When he earnestly prayed that it wouldn't rain, no rain fell for three and a half years. ¹⁸ He prayed again, God sent rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

¹⁹ My siblings, if any of you wander from the truth and someone turns back the wanderer, ²⁰ recognize that whoever brings a sinner back from the wrong path will save them from death and will bring about the forgiveness of many sins.

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The past month has taken us through James' letter. At five chapters, it is a letter concerned with ethics. This is a community of Jewish Christians living in a land where there are many Jews. So,

of course, observing the Law that boils down to loving God, neighbor, and one's self is in the DNA of this letter.

Many of you may remember from a month ago that we are to be doers of the word and not hearers only. God spoke a word in our souls like a master gardener plants a garden. It is our responsibility to tend to the garden of our souls.

Then, we can recall that in James 2, God gives us a law that doesn't bind us, but sets us free to love our neighbors. Our neighbors who may or may not look, act, think, or dress like us. Our neighbors who come from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, God is the God of the outcast, oppressed, and poor.

James 3:1-12 reminded us two weeks ago that the tongue is a powerful instrument. It can be used for good or ill. It can destroy or build up. With it, we can bless or curse. But, we can't have it both ways. We are to be a blessing to everyone we come in contact with!

Last week, James told us that we are to seek heavenly wisdom, not fleshly wisdom. We are to embody the wisdom that comes from the Spirit. We are to follow the examples of Joseph, Joshua, and Jesus who embodied heavenly wisdom. This wisdom is pure, peaceful, gentle, and genuine.

Now, here we are at the end of James. These words touch topics that we haven't seen so far in this letter. "If any of you are suffering, pray! If you are happy, sing! If you are sick, call upon the elders to anoint you with oil and pray over you! Have any of you sinned?"

You will be forgiven!” It’s almost as if James is adding a postscript to his letter: “Now, y’all, don’t forget about X, Y, or Z!!!!” And then he throws in the prophet Elijah.....so a “post-postscript?”

It makes me wonder, are these random words James is trying to fit in a letter? Is he trying to fill up the expensive parchment before he sends it out to the community? Well, maybe not. It fits right in with what’s going on in this letter addressed to the community of believers.

What we have read or listened to every week is what not only individuals are supposed to do, but what a community of believers are supposed to do. So, yes, in today’s passage, prayer is indeed an action done individually AND it is also a communal act. If one is suffering, the people are to pray with that person. If one is cheerful,

the people should sing with that person. If one is sick, then the people are to anoint that person with oil and pray over them!

The prayers we utter as a community and the hymns we sing as a corporate body are rooted in a deep faith! Our prayers and songs that are rooted in a deep faith will bring about healing! And when we pray and sing, it triggers the sins we are to confess in our own lives so that it may promote another kind of healing, that is the healing of broken relationships.

And to give the community a prime example of someone with a deep faith who earnestly prayed, James gives the body of believers the example of Elijah! The prophet of prophets! The man who told the wicked couple Ahab and Jezebel that there would be no rain! The man prayed and there was dry land. The man prayed and the

heavens opened up with rain! So, obviously, Elijah's example would resonate with this particular community.

But, when we say "I'll pray for you" or "please pray for me", do we really know what it means or demands? We say "thoughts and prayers" every time a disaster or tragedy happens. I hear it so often that I vomit because people who are suffering from violence or natural disasters are sick and tired of the thoughts and prayers that lead to no action and ignore James' statement in 1:22 to be "doers of the word and not hearers only." Or.....I'm guilty of this.....telling someone I'll pray for them and then forget to! I mean, we throw the word "prayer" around so much that I think we have forgotten its meaning and its true power!

Praying is not passive! It is active! Prayer that is rooted in a deep faith shakes us to our core. It can bring about various forms of

healing: Physical, emotional, or relational. It is not only for the individual, but for the community!

As Presbyterians, we take prayer rather seriously. When we gather for a meeting, we begin and end with prayer. When unsure about a decision, we pray for discernment. When I was working on my ordination exams, I had to write a lesson plan for a session meeting. I started the hypothetical meeting with prayer, but forgot to end it with prayer. Unfortunately, one of the graders noticed that and made a point to let me know in my final grade. But, I still passed. Or when things got interesting at the Presbytery Meeting in March 2020, our General Presbyter, Rev. Jerrod Lowry, asked us to take a moment to pray.

And that's who we are called as a community. We are to be a community that prays. And like the example of Elijah that James

presents in this chapter, maybe we have examples of people in our lives who prayed fervently. I certainly remember my parents praying every morning as part of their devotional time before taking me to school. For this congregation, maybe you remember the times people gathered when someone was ill or even a happy occasion like my ordination in March of 2019 when many of you gathered around me, laid hands on me, and prayed for me.

BUT! AND I mean BUT! Just because we pray doesn't mean we will get what we ask for! We won't have our "best lives now" just because we pray for a couple of million bucks and read a book by a sham who pretends to be a minister of the Gospel. Just because we pray and then get "slain by the Spirit" by a fraud who preaches the garbage of the Prosperity Gospel doesn't mean our physical infirmities will cease. This is definitely not what James is suggesting. For if those spiritual hacks had one ounce of

theological integrity, they would do something better with their time instead of making a buck off of the vulnerable.

But, James says that a prayer rooted in a deep faith can indeed begin a healing that even we cannot fathom. Sure, it can be physical healing as well as emotional and communal. I'm not disputing that. For when we pray, we can also air out our dirty laundry and be honest with ourselves and each other. It is when we do that a true healing can begin to happen.

But, oftentimes, prayer becomes a chore. Or we don't take it seriously.

In the 16 years since I started working in various forms of church ministry, I have seen enough Strategic Planning or Visioning Sessions that don't begin with a prayer that is rooted in a deep

faith. Honestly, I hate hearing the phrases “Strategic Planning” or “Visioning Sessions” because I have seen them done poorly too many times. And the people there believe they can find the answers in that hour or half-day event when in actuality, if fervent prayer were involved, it would take way more time.

Several years ago, I was introduced to a book in my Introduction to Evangelism course at Union Seminary. Martha Grace Reese’s book, *Unbinding the Gospel*, helps Christians to discern *why* it is important to evangelize. *Why* it is important to actively share our faith with others. In one of the chapters, Martha Grace Reese talks about a church that was growing and had developed an evangelism team a year before.¹ They were unsure of what to do, so they asked Rev. Reese to help them strategize. Her response: Don’t

¹ Martha Grace Reese. *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008, 42-45.

make any decisions of what to do for the next three months. Use that time to meet as a group and pray.

Now, that doesn't make much sense! Aren't we supposed to be busy? Well....if our actions are not rooted in a prayer of deep faith, then our busyness will be just that.....busyness. Empty. Meaningless. Exhausting.

Needless to say, the church that Rev. Reese consulted was able to be more effective in their ministry instead of seeking simplistic answers to complex solutions. They were forced to sit in the tension and wait. Wait for the leading of the Spirit.

Yes, our prayers are individual AND communal. We can't bear the cross alone nor are we to push it solely on someone else.

As James points out, the Word is planted in us. We are to be doers of the word. We are to lovingly serve everyone we meet. We are to be a blessing to everyone we come in contact with. We are to seek heavenly wisdom. And we are to pray fervently. Those prayers that are rooted in a deep faith will lead us to the suffering among us, the cheerful in our midst, and the sick.

Siblings in Christ, trust this Good News!

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Amen.