

Power of Prayer

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-41

I will admit that I approached the sermon topic for today with more than a bit of trepidation. As much as I enjoy and am inspired by reading through the epistle of James, the last verses are strong and, I believe when read with a clear eye of faith, of absolute importance.

To begin, let's set the stage: James, brother of Jesus, an important leader of the church, has written a tight, concise explanation of the Christian faith. In essence, he says, it's not enough to talk about the Christian faith, we must live it. "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such a faith save him?"

Ultimately, the proof of the reality of our faith is a changed life. In that, James is quite clear: First, he exhorts Christians to act justly in society. He then explains the relationship between faith and action. Next, James shows the importance of controlling one's speech.

That is followed by the examination of the difference between earthly and heavenly wisdom. James continues with an encouragement to turn from evil desires to follow God and reproves those who would trust in their own plans and passions. Next, he instructs his readers to be patient with one another, to be straightforward in their promises, and to pray for one another.

Not bad for a short book stuck in at nearly the end of the Bible!

But it's the prayer part that gets me. Not because I don't believe in prayer, (far from it!), but because it is such a difficult topic to really begin to approach, let alone understand. Just exactly what IS prayer and what it ISN'T is enough to fill an entire book (and a fellow named Richard Foster did an excellent job of doing just that!) so how do we wrestle with it in a few short minutes on a Sunday morning?

First, I simply must address one of my pet peeves. To those of you who were here for the Vesper Service, I apologize for the overlap, but it will be brief!

As you may know, there has been an ongoing debate in the US over the role of prayer in school. It's a great "hot topic" used to separate "real Christians" from "wannabes" or something like that.

To the shock of most of the congregations I have served, I come down solidly on the “no prayer in school side”. Shocking, no?

But reflecting on that idea gives us a perfect introduction to James.

I believe that prayer is a powerful spiritual discipline that engages the believer and the Creator in a way that is otherwise impossible. With that as the understanding, why would I want a teacher, whose job is already extremely difficult, to take on theological instruction of my children? For either prayer IS important, and therefore must be approached as important, OR it is meaningless muttering, and therefore a waste of everyone’s time.

Or, worse yet, to have a prayer, written by committee, passed by a school board, guaranteed not to insult anyone, shared as if it were a genuine, powerful prayer?

No thanks!

Besides, I am fully convinced that as long as teachers give pop-quizzes in their classes, students will pray!

So...no prayer tokenism for me, thank you very much! Don’t teach my children that prayer is without consequences, for I very much believe the exact opposite!

As does James, so let’s dig into these few verses...

To do that, we need to start where James begins; with the simple understanding that if you are sick, pray.

Now before you give in to a skeptical or cynical twist that this is far too simplistic and dismissive of modern medicine as a viable treatment for illness, please understand; this passage is not intended as an affront to medical science. Trying to read contemporary scientific truths into this ancient text would be a sore misreading of the Bible as well as a glib treatment of science.

With that said, let me tell you a bit about my own history. When I was taking a course in CPE, Clinical Pastoral Education, I was served as a hospital chaplain.

I was assigned to divide my time between the pediatric oncology ward, which means working with small children and their parents as these youngsters died of cancer, or to work trauma care, the emergency room, where all the craziness you see on TV can and does happen. These were both high stress, high impact, disaster filled settings. From the shock of a horrific accident and the aftermath of human disaster to the slow, all-too-inevitable taking of a child's life by an implacable foe in cancer, the people I served were all in difficult if not impossible situations.

While I was assigned there, I did extensive reading about the role of the chaplain in a hospital setting. Some of the material was pretty obvious; comfort, listen, non-anxious presence. But some of what I read I found inspiring.

Several medical studies conducted over the years have chronicled the power of faith as a part of physical healing. Faith, manifest in prayer, can reduce stress, lower blood pressure, and bring a sense of serenity that enables the body to heal much more rapidly than when that faith is absent. In case after case, hospitals have reported that their success rate is higher in instances where a chaplain is present to assist a person of faith.

Please don't misunderstand, this is not to say that this biblical text is true because it can be scientifically proven, it is simply to affirm that there doesn't need to be an inherent contradiction between faith and science.

Prayer is, however, a part of that healing and yet it is so very much more.

James also reminds us that it is critical for a community to surround a person in need and bring solidarity to their suffering. Now James knows nothing (and cares less) about this modern fad of "spiritual but not religious" nonsense. And he certainly would not have understood the idea of being a person of faith without a faith community. That very concept would have been beyond comprehension; part of being a person of faith means being in the context of a faith community.

The simple fact that you are not alone has power in and of itself. The fact that others are there to support you when you stumble, even as you are there to support them in their time of need, is absolutely critical!

It is in this context of the importance of the community that James expands the definition of illness to include more than the physical. James is equally interested in the deterioration and brokenness of human relationships.

Sin, he tells us, is the ultimate disease. Sin not only destroys the bonds of human kinship but also blocks or even prevents the power of corporate prayer.

Now this concept takes us into one of the most uncomfortable parts of the Christian faith. This is why the act of forgiveness is one of the most significant deeds a person can perform. And, sometimes, one of the hardest.

Forgiveness participates in God's global redemption effort and contributes to the transformation of this whole broken world back to God's intended goodness.

Let me say that again, for it is a critical concept for this morning:
Forgiveness participates in God's global redemption effort and contributes to the transformation of this whole broken world back to God's intended goodness.

That, my friends, is truth. However, try explaining, that to the young wife whose husband walks away for the arms of another. Or to the parents whose child has their life taken by the irresponsibility of a drunk driver. Or to a victim of sexual assault whose life will be ruined, who will be cast as a whore or a slut even as their attacker goes free.

This is a hard truth, I certainly understand, but it is truth. God has called on us to be co-creators and the responsibility of that task lies on our shoulders and never with more weight than when we are called to forgive.

That is why the act of forgiveness is one of the most significant deeds a person can perform.

James embodies this idea beautifully by making a reference to Elijah, whose singular act contributed to the replenishing rains on the earth. In this light, a single prayer for healing and a single act of forgiveness can trigger a shower of God's redeeming love through the earth.

However, prayer is not without its own risk! In fact, there are numerous risks in prayer for the faithful:

When praying as a mindless act with no connection to the heart of faith becomes so meaningless that when true prayer is needed, there is no place to begin. This worthless exercise robs prayer of its power.

When praying in such a wishy-washy way as to not pray at all: “God, uh, if you don’t mind, and you have the time, and it’s Your will and if it’s not too much of a bother, would you heal my brother?” This is the prayer of the weak of faith who would dare not come into God’s presence but would hope for a scrap from His table.

When prayer that is afraid of an answer. If we approach prayer like magic, then if we don’t receive what we wish we must have prayed wrong. Nope. Sometimes the answer to prayer is “no”, not an answer we would want. So, the thinking goes, if we don’t ask, we can’t get an answer we don’t like!

Scariest of all is the realization that prayer changes...us! Sometimes deep, meaningful, heartfelt prayer can change the hardest of hearts...our own! There is always that chance that our encounter with the Divine will begin the process of redemption in the world, beginning with us!

Prayer is powerful indeed, for you see, if we dare to encounter it, it can break the hardest of stones, the ones found in our hearts. It can bind lives together. It can become the foundation of modern miracles. Prayer works.

James takes all this on in these few words. Ultimately, the text covers a lot of ground – healing prayer, solidarity in community, forgiveness of sins – but it is all tied together into a common theme: prayer really works. Prayer is the most efficient, the most powerful, not simply when it is understood or only when it is believed but when it is understood, believed...

And practiced!