

Sunday Sermon
September 30, 2018
James 5:13-20
“The Prayer of Faith”

Introduction

Carey had been in the hospital for five months. Before she could go home, she had to be eating and walking. Progress was slow. The food would not stay down, so the feeding tube stayed in. Every day the physical therapist came, but Carey could hardly stand, much less walk. Everyone was discouraged—Carey, the staff, and me, the hospital chaplain. Carey and I had read scripture together; we had prayed together; we had cried together.

Then one day Carey told me about how her church back home held services of healing and anointed persons with oil. And I remembered that our church *Book of Common Worship* has a “Service for Wholeness” that includes an anointing with oil. So I got some olive oil. I read scripture, “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” I made a cross of oil on Carey's forehead, and I prayed.

Carey went home two weeks later. She was going up and down steps and eating fried chicken.

The next week I was paged to Betty's room. Betty said, “Oh, chaplain, I had to let you know. Your prayer was answered. They said they were going to break my jaw and wire my mouth shut. And now they are saying they do not have to. It was your prayer.” I said, “But the doctors just now got around to reading your X-rays. That's what decided you did not need surgery.” “Oh no, it was your prayer,” she said. “You asked God to touch me with a healing hand. And I am going home. I am healing, I do not have to have surgery.”

The next day I went into Alma's room. Alma was moaning in pain, so weak she could barely move or keep her eyes open. She was too frail to speak much. I said, “Would you like to have prayer?” She nodded. We prayed. After the “Amen,” Alma opened her eyes. She sat up in bed. She swung her legs around to the side. She slipped out of bed and dropped to her knees. She raised her hands and her face to the ceiling and shouted, “Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Jesus!”

I left the room. I went and sat down at the charting station. I put my head in my hands and said, “Lord, what are you doing to me? I do not know what to do with this. I'm a Presbyterian, for goodness sake.”

I

We wonder about prayer, especially petitions for the sick. After all, many of us

have experienced the devastating disappointment of praying for someone we love more than ourselves; and then, despite the earnestness of our request, that person's condition worsens. We pray and trust, but our loved one becomes sick unto death.

We are tempted to be like the tired old woman who when the pastor offered to pray, said, "Well, you can pray if you want to, but I doubt it will do any good."

But we do keep praying, week after week. We go where there is a death or a tragic accident, or a diagnosis of a devastating disease. And the people say, "Pray for us. Please have the church pray."

Why is it that they say that? What is it that they think we have to offer with our prayers? We know that everyone Jesus healed later died of a fatal illness or some cause. We know that to be human is to be vulnerable, to encounter sickness, and eventually to die. We cannot prevent that with our prayers.

So why do we pray? We pray because we know, in the words of the Apostle Paul that we need not "lose heart." Even if the one for whom we are praying does not become physically well, we do not lose heart or hope. "Even though our outer nature is wasting away," Paul says, "our inner nature is being renewed day by day."

We pray because prayer is the channel through which the grace and strength of God are brought to bear upon the problems and troubles of this world. This week when we did not know what else to do, we prayed.

II

A woman lay in a hospital bed, body inflamed by the spread of cancer. Visit after visit, her pastor prayed for healing. Each time the pastor could see her disappointment that she was not being healed.

Then one day the woman said, "Today let's not pray that I will be healed. God knows that I hate this illness. God knows I want to be healed. Let's pray that, whether I am healed or not, I will feel close to God. Because even if I am not healed, especially if I am not healed, that is what I really want in my life . . . God."

When all is said and done, we want not simply health in our lives. We want God. Rabbi Howard Kushner says: People who pray for miracles do not always get miracles. But people who pray:

For courage to face uncertainties,

For strength to bear the unbearable,

For grace to remember what they have left instead of what they have lost, these people often find their prayers answered.

Their prayers help them tap reserves of courage and faith that are before then unrecognized. Their prayers put them in touch with the very power and spirit of God.

III

But let's admit it is difficult to have discipline and passion for intercessory

prayer. We lose discipline because we get busy and distracted. We lose passion perhaps because we start doubting. Or sometimes we lose passion because we do not doubt the prayer's power. We realize that prayer cannot only be comforting; prayer can also be discomfoting. It can bring us face to face with our failures, our shortcomings.

If we are going to become passionate about prayer, then we had better come clean about our doubts, our fears, and our desires to be in control. That is why James says prayer has to include confession along with the intercessions.

Conclusion

I do not begin to understand everything about prayer. I do not understand why some of the things we pray for happen, and some do not. Why with some prayers healing comes in this world and with some it comes in the next. Why sometimes we feel our prayers are just bouncing off the ceiling, and other times we feel God's very presence in the room with us.

But I know this much: That in the providence of God, prayer matters. It matters a great deal. And I know that prayer without faith is powerless. And faith without prayer is powerless. So we seek the faith to keep praying. And we pray to keep the faith.

James ends his message with a challenge to us to proclaim the gospel to those who are not part of the community of faith—whether they never have been in the faith or they have wandered from the faith.

Be a church, James says, for people at every stage of praying. Be a church who sings, a church who attends to the sick, and a church who experiences the miraculous power of prayer.

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God, help this congregation to be that kind of church.

Help them to keep the faith.

Help them to keep praying. Amen.

Time for Children

I hurt my foot this week. That is why I am wearing this special shoe. I went to the doctor to make sure it was not broken. And it was not. So I soaked it in cold water, rubbed medicine on it and rested it. And all that was important to do.

Can you think of anything else I can do for it? Yes, prayer. The people in both the Old Testament and the New Testament stories believed in praying. The Jews had a saying that people who prayed surrounded their houses with walls stronger than iron.

And do you know what else they did? When a Jew was ill, that person went to the rabbi, who was like their pastor, first before going to the doctor. The rabbi would anoint the person with oil and pray. One Greek physician, whose name was Galen, said it was “the best of all medicines.”

So I brought some oil. There is nothing magical about this oil. It is a sign and symbol that people are praying for the people and God is with them. So let’s touch the oil and then touch the names of people on our church prayer list. Now, let’s say a prayer for them:

Dear God, help these people to have strength, healing, and hope.
Thank you for hearing our prayer. Amen.