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James 5:13-20

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***James***

***13Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 14Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. 16Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. 17Elijah was a human like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth yielded its harvest.***

***19My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, 20you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.***

The first time a priest came into my hospital room before surgery to pray with me, I took it to mean that my surgery was far more serious than I had been led to believe. To me, a priest (any man, wearing a shirt with that white piece in the middle of the collar) at a time of illness meant last rites would be administered. I had just had ear surgery – I didn’t think it was a life threatening surgery, so I was sure the doctor’s hadn’t told me everything, and the priest knew something I didn’t know. Thank goodness I was wrong and I now have different views about people who wear those shirts, and about prayer.

I think that the priest represented something, religion, that, as a product or service good, didn’t seem relevant. I was only interested in science, medicine, good surgeons, and good physical outcomes. As a *product*, religion doesn’t work. It’s not something you can go looking for when a problem arises and follow the instructions and the problem goes away. It’s not something you can pick up on the way home when you’re feeling empty and fill yourself up. It’s not a tool that you can just pick up and cover over a problem like tape, or fill a hole, or fix a leak. As a product, religion doesn’t come in packaging with a list of ingredients, spiritual nutritional value, and a big label that suggests that it has 5X more saving power than the religion on the next corner.

Fortunately, religion is not a product like that. If a person approaches religion from the point of view of a consumer, they ask what’s in it for me, what does it have to offer, what will it cost me, and so on. God is not transactional. Everything we have read in the letter of James for the past five weeks has been explanations of concepts like wisdom, partiality, watching our tongue, and living a good life with others. None of those things involved scratching God’s back so that God would scratch ours.

The text we read from today is the very end of this letter from James, and it is the first time James has something specific for us to do, that at first doesn’t seem like it is actually an action item. Pray. No matter our condition, we should pray. Are any of you suffering? Pray. Are any of you cheerful? Pray – sing songs of praise. Is anyone sick? They need to call the elders to come and pray and anoint with oil as anointing too was a part of a prayer ritual. The prayer of faith will save the sick.

We need to be careful not to read some of these lines from James backwards, and thus treat religion like a product that has certain properties. “The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.” This seems to imply that if one has sinned, they must be sick. Or if one is sick, they must have sinned. This has led to blaming the victim over and over and over in the history of the Church. And the prayer of faith will heal the sick – so if we are still sick the prayer must not have been one of faith? Or good enough? Or strong enough? Or often enough? Or the sin must have been particularly terrible? This passage from James has been linked to some real damage over the years. Think of people who are suffering and get the message that God has forgotten them, Jesus doesn’t love them, they weren’t good enough Christians, they were doing their Christianity wrong somehow. If this text is read wrong, prayer is seen as transactional. James does not say that when – not if – we are sick we should pray and our sickness will go away *as a direct result*. Just as he does not say that when we are cheerful we should sing songs of praise – *so that* our happy life continues. Prayer itself doesn’t work that way. Prayer does change things, but not always in the way we imagined it.

Henri Nouwen says, “One of the experiences of prayer is that it seems that nothing happens. But when you start with it and look back over a long period of prayer, you suddenly realize that something has happened. What is most close, most intimate, most present, often cannot be experienced directly but only with a certain distance. When I *[Henri Nouwen]* think that I am only distracted, just wasting my time, something is happening too Immediate for knowing, understanding, and experiencing. Only in retrospect do I realize that something very important has taken place.”

Has this happened to you? Can you think of a time when distance gave you a better view of circumstances from long ago? Can you look back over that intervening time and see that something very important has taken place? Sometimes an *entire lifetime* is not enough distance to gain that perspective. Sometimes *only a few years* later gives us that perspective.

Prayer changes us too. As individuals and as a community.

Henri Nouwen cautions a community against neglecting prayer when he says “By prayer, community is *created* as well as expressed.” “When a church community’s many activities are no longer seen and experienced as part of prayer itself, the community quickly degenerates into a club with a common cause but no common vocation.”

Think of all of the ways we pray even during our worship service. The liturgy offers us opportunities to pray in pre-arranged ways using words of others, or words we are familiar with. We pray our own thoughts out loud in community too, during the prayers of the people. Whenever we sing, whenever we engage with each other, all of our responses to the word and to others, whenever we respond to the music with love and the urge to dance – all of this is us engaging with each other in the presence of God, and that, is community prayer too. We speak, listen, hear, meditate, think, all as prayer while we worship. As we worship, we give shape to who we are and what we believe as individuals as well as collectively. And collectively we find ways to be that shape, out in the world. Each of our committees that prayerfully gather and come up with ideas to share and some to implement are ways that we bring that shape to our activities. That is how even what we do out in the world can be seen as part of our prayer life. What we say to God, to each other, and to ourselves forms us.

Bishop John Shelby Spong once said, “The older I get, the more deeply I believe but the fewer beliefs I have.”

Of all of the lessons from James over these past five weeks, “Pray.” is the most particular command James made. There are many ways to live wisely, many things to consider when trying not to show partiality, many reminders to hold your tongue, but in all of them, to be in community well, in all of our circumstances, we must pray.

Henri Nouwen says that he is “deeply convinced that the necessity of prayer, and to pray unceasingly, is not as much based on our desire for God as on God's desire for us. It is God's passionate pursuit of us that calls us to prayer.” In that spirit, let us submit then to God’s pursuit.

Amen.