

<sup>13</sup> Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. <sup>14</sup> Are 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. <sup>15</sup> The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup> Therefore 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. <sup>17</sup> Elijah 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. <sup>18</sup> Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth yielded its harvest. <sup>19</sup> My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, <sup>20</sup> you 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.

### **Response to the Word**

L: This is the Word of God for the people of God

**P: Thanks be to God!**

James 5:13-20

09/22/2024 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

“Powerful and Effective”

by Amy Terhune

“Father Barry Foster, a priest in Dublin, Ireland, parked his car on a rather steep slope close to his church. His little cairn terrier was lying on the rear seat and could not be seen by anyone outside the vehicle. Father Foster got out of the car and turned to lock the door with his usual parting command to the dog. “Stay!” he ordered loudly, to an apparently empty car. “Stay!” An elderly man was watching all this with amused interest. Grinning, he suggested, “Why don't you just try putting on the emergency brake?” [from Colin Jeffery, *Catholic Digest*, May 1992, p. 72.]

“Our subject today is prayer. To some, prayer is the equal of watching someone say “Stay,” to their automobile fully expecting it to obey. To some, prayer is an exercise in futility. [2 ¶s from “Prayers That Work” by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] But not to me.

“Some years ago, when Leonard Griffith was pastor of the famous City Temple in London, he wrote a fascinating book entitled *Barriers to Christian Belief*. In that book he dealt with some problems that have over the years been real obstacles and stumbling blocks for people in their faith pilgrimage... One of the barriers he listed was...“unanswered prayer.” It does seem to be a fact of our experience that many people do get discouraged and they do give up and drop out on the faith because they feel a sense of failure in their prayer life.” [from “You Do Have A Prayer” by James Moore, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Which might lead one to ask how to pray. Is there a right way to pray? A correct posture? Sacred language? Good times or bad times to pray? I used to have a clergy mentor who always advised those of us he mentored that the only wrong way to pray is not to pray at all. And I'm inclined to agree with him. Except that then I hear chords from a Janice Joplin song reverberating through the back of my mind...

“Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz? My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends. Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends, so Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?” A perfect example of a really bad prayer. But she's not alone. I've heard people pray for the destruction of enemies, be they opposing football teams, opposing armies, or even oppositional coworkers. I've

heard prayer used to manipulate feelings and trigger human emotional responses – sometimes for very abusive, partisan, or misguided reasons, such as when public prayer is used to shame one who doesn't fall into line. Adam Hamilton wrote once about a couple who came to him asking him to pray for them because they were having trouble selling their house. In the course of the conversation, Hamilton learned that their asking price was about \$30K over its market value, which is why it wasn't selling. Now Hamilton was then faced with one of those moral conundrums. Do you tell these long-time members of your church that they're really asking you to pray that they can successfully bilk the next homeowner out of an extra \$30K? That their greed could be their financial undoing? So yes, there are wrong ways to pray, or at least, wrong things for which to pray.

James Moore writes: "Prayer must be more than an emergency magical lamp rubbed in a crisis. The truth is that many people give up on prayer because they never understand what prayer is. Much that passes for prayer is irrational, superstitious, and self-centered, and then we wonder why God seems silent." [adapted from "You Do Have A Prayer" by James Moore, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Years ago, I heard about a little girl kneeling beside her bed, her eyes closed, her hands clasped in prayer as she very reverently recited her ABCs to the Lord. When her parents asked what she was doing, she admitted that she wasn't sure what to pray, so she figured she would say the letters and God would put the words together on his own. And I get that. Sometimes, we just don't have the words. In the epistle to the Romans, the apostle Paul writes of how, in prayer, the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. Sometimes, it's all we can do to come into God's presence and lay our burden down before the Lord, and trust that in time, God will put the letters together that help us cope and carry us through the worst moments. And there are times when I come into God's presence and admit that I'm not sure how to pray, or what to hope, or how to move forward, and I trust that God will guide me in time.

But there are other times when I force myself to try to put my prayer into words, not because God doesn't already know what's going on, but because it helps me wrestle with issues I need to face. God's presence is a safe place to wrestle in that God helps me understand my feelings and root out bad theology, harmful expectations, and sinful attitudes. I say "safe place" a little tongue and cheek, because sometimes it doesn't feel that way. Prayer can be distinctly uncomfortable, particularly when I'm being called to something I'm not sure how to do or challenged to change in ways I'd just as soon not.

In our lesson today from the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of James, we hear about the topic of prayer, but not merely on a personal level. James is talking to the church. We are called to be a praying people. But let me offer a bit of background. Over the centuries, there have been several Christian theologians and leaders who don't have much use for James. The apostle Paul writes that we are saved by faith alone, which became the great rallying cry of the protestant reformation, and which rejected any notion that we could earn our way into heaven by good deeds. But we heard last week in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of James that we are to be doers of the word and not hearers only – that our faith is shown by how we live. Which is probably why Martin Luther called James "an epistle of straw", and wondered why it was in the new testament at all. But 200 years later, John Wesley could see what Luther couldn't in the moment – that indeed we are saved by faith alone, but faith is not merely internal. Faith is a response to God's work in our life, and that response is both a deepening spirituality and a lived expression. We don't do good in order to be saved, as if we could earn our way into God's love. That is called works righteousness, and its heresy. We do good because we have been saved. It's a response to God's love. And James rightly concludes his letter on faith in action with prayer, because prayer is the linking activity – prayer is how God uses what God is doing within us to commission and mobilize us in mission and ministry beyond ourselves.

To the church, James says: Pray! Pray when you are suffering. And when everything is great, rejoice, praise God, sing, and give thanks! In all circumstances, look to enter God's presence. And I love what he says to the sick. Call on the elders of the church to pray and anoint. Listen to what Luke Timothy Johnson writes about that: "The logic of the world is to isolate the sick from the healthy. The healthy organism recoils from what is sick in order to protect itself. Sickness, then, becomes the occasion for social isolation and alienation. This "natural reflux" of survival, however, also becomes a form of sin when it leads to the deliberate exclusion of the sick from the community's care and support, when the physical distance imposed by sickness is embraced as a spiritual alienation from those who are sick and a rejection of them from the community. In James, the sick are empowered to summon the elders. This is a remarkable reversal.... Not those who are well, but those who are sick define the truth of the situation." [from "The Letter of James; Introduction, Commentary, and Reflection" by Luke Timothy Johnson, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. XII, L.E. Keck et al, eds (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998) pg. 224.]. It is the sick, the marginalized, the alienated that is given agency and power, and the church must respond with prayer and inclusion. I don't get to say "it's not a good time. I'm busy". Nor do I want to. Friends, when you're sick, I need you to call me in to pray. With stringent privacy laws today to protect your information and your personal medical history in today's world, I have no way to know that you're in the hospital or home sick unless somebody lets me know. I don't get a vibe that you're in bad spot. I wish it worked that way, but it doesn't. My responsibility as an elder in the church is to pray for you, include you, connect you in spirit to the community of faith, and I want to do that. When I fail, all of us need to repent. But the power and the agency is yours, as it should be. You have to call me in. Enough on that. You get it.

Mark Trotter writes, that "if we take James seriously, prayer is what the Church ought to be spending its time doing. But for some of us, especially us Methodists, that is such a radical idea it needs an argument in order to support it." So Trotter offers two reasons for making prayer the primary agenda for the life of the Church, and I'm going to shamelessly steal them. The first reason is because we know what prayer will do. The second reason is because we never know what prayer will do. [from "Let Us Pray" by Mark Trotter, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

I'm not crazy. Stick with me here.

Brian Stoffregen remembers being a part of an impromptu discussion among some of his friends back in high school. One of their classmates had recently lost a sister in a car accident. Some in this group confessed that they had thought about going over to visit after the accident, but they didn't know what to do or what they should say. They were intimidated by grief, you see. It happens. But one the boys spoke up then. He admitted to having the same fears, but refused to let them keep him from being a friend in an hour of need. So he had gone over and spent most of Saturday with his classmate. The one who had lost his sister was not his usual self. He was quiet, not real hungry, not boisterous or cracking jokes like usual. But they played some video games, and did some homework, and shot hoops out in the driveway for a while. And they talked. And when the boy finally headed home that evening, his grieving friend thanked him for just being there. It was nice to not be alone. Even though he couldn't do anything or say anything that would change the tragedy, his presence made a difference. [from illustrations for Luke 18:1-8 on [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

The good news of our faith is that we aren't alone. We know this much. Prayer is the experience of God with us. God is a friend at all times. To pray is to enter the presence of God – not that God will always change the situation, but knowing that God is with you, that God is going through the tragedy or suffering or depression or even death with you, not as a far-off God, way out in space, but as your very close and loving companion. Sometimes, it feels like our prayers just hit the ceiling. I've been through seasons like that myself. But pray anyway, and eventually, God's presence is felt again.

The other things we know is that prayer changes us.

Richard Rohr is also a Franciscan priest who runs a retreat center in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He has a wonderful word for the spiritual quality in us that is the result of prayer. He calls it "holy spaciousness." That's what prayer does, it creates a "holy spaciousness." It removes all of that which is distracting in our life, all the debris that accumulates in our life, that we carry around with us year after year, and creates a "holy spaciousness."

Then Rohr points out, if you want God to come into your life, you have to make room for God. Prayer is the way you make room for God. The reason that God may not come into our lives is that our lives are so cluttered. There is no room in our lives for anything but the self and its preoccupations. Prayer is a means of emptying our lives of that which is distracting. Prayer is a form of remodeling, making room for God. Prayer is a form of hospitality, preparing for a visit. Prayer creates "holy spaciousness." We have seen that. We know what prayer will do. It makes room for God, and for other people. [2 ¶s from Let Us Pray" by Mark Trotter, www.Sermons.com.]

So prayer changes us. And prayer changes the world around us. James tells us that the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective. They remake us from within so that we can be part of God's work in transforming the world. So that we can share the gospel. So that more people experience god's love.

And that's really what James is getting at. Prayer changes things. When we pray, God moves. Now, God may not move the way we want. God may not do things the way we think they should happen. This, incidentally, is that most dangerous part of any discussion about prayer, according to Mark Trotter, because the temptation is to make believe that prayer is something that will manipulate God and get God to do what we think God ought to do. But that's not how it works. Prayer is how God moves us.

I recall a woman in my office in tears because she had been in a relationship with a young man for 3 or 4 years, and things had not worked out. She had prayed to God, she fasted, she did everything she could to save that relationship, but in the end, he walked. And now, she was turning 30, lost in grief, convinced that her last chance for marriage and family had passed her by. A few years later, I ran into her at a community event. She was newly married and pregnant with her first child. And at one point she said to me, "I've met the right one for me. I shudder to think what my life would have been if God had answered my prayer the way I wanted God to back then." Friends, we're not always patient. We lose sight of what matters. But God moves when the time is right and the circumstances are right, and sometimes, God waits for us to be in the right place deep inside. Prayer is how we get there.

We know that in prayer God is present with us. And we know that in prayer, God will change us, move in us, and work through us to build the reign of God. How that happens, what direction it takes, and who God ends up working through is often surprising and unexpected. Because even though we know what God will do when we come in prayer, we never know what God will do through our prayers.

My friends, this week, you're going to be asked to pray for the future of this church. Not so that we can be better than others. Not so that we can filled to our hearts content with people and money and resources. There's a lot of anxiety in the church about those things. But we're asking you to pray so that we can follow God's lead. So that we can be an avenue for change within the heart and the community. We're asking you to risk this prayer: God, what do you want to do through me. All that we need will follow if we start in faith, if we ground ourselves in gratitude and let prayer be the vehicle for illuminating our next steps. We know that God is present with us. And we know even now that God is changing us and moving us from the inside out. Where that takes us, only God knows. But it's going to be hard. And it's going to be good. And it's going to bring hope. And it's going to build faith. We don't know what God is going to do. But we know God. And that's where we start. Thanks be to God. Amen.