

September 29th, 2024

James 5:13-20 “The Prayer of the Righteous”

This morning is our last look at the book of James before we start a new series next month. I think it's important to let you know that even though it's our last week in James, we have not read every verse of this five-chapter book. The lectionary gives us a bird's eye view of the major themes of the Bible and we could have easily spent 10 weeks on this little five-chapter book, but we got five which is awesome. I think we did great covering the major themes. We learned that words matter. We learned that actions matter. How you use your words is important when you're trying to show the world that God's love for humanity is impartial. Last week, we learned that there are two types of wisdom – Wisdom from above and wisdom from below and we were given a handy-dandy vice and virtue list to help us figure out which is which. But I've got to be honest, I sure wish we had another week or two to cover some of the things in this book that the lectionary skipped over. I encourage you to read the whole book. It's only five chapters. Just read it in one sitting. With that in mind, I've *got* go over some very important things that we're missing by not covering the gap between last week's text and this week's text.

In chapter 4, verse 10-12 James reminds the church that when you insult or criticize someone, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge of the law - and there is only one judge of the law. In other words, put away your judgy-bits and let God deal with it. In 4:13, James says that every day is a gift from God so don't procrastinate and say, “Oh, I'll get around to doing all this church stuff tomorrow.” Do it today! In 4:14-5:6 he writes, don't boast for what you've gained at the expense of others. All your riches will fade away into nothingness. What you take with you is either the love you gave or the pain you caused. In 5:7-12 he reiterates the importance of not being a hypocrite and once again tells people not to judge others. It's not your job. Your job is to be patient, say what you believe and do what you say.

There. Now I feel like you're caught up. It's all been very practical down-to-earth, roll up your sleeves wisdom. Let's see what we've got this week. Okay, ready? Here we go. "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up." Oh, dear heavens. "Hey pastor, haven't we been talking about religious movements that build their whole doctrine based on one or two obscure verses in the Bible?" Yes. We've mentioned that a few times over the summer. "Yeah? Well, it sounds like James is saying prayer is what saves the sick!" Yes, it kind of does. "Let's see, we have Christian Scientists and Jehovah's Witnesses, a handful of Pentecostal and Amish sects who reject medical treatment based on this verse." Okay. "And that's just the ones who don't believe in medical intervention for standard, run-of-the-mill *physical* illnesses. Want a list of churches that don't believe in medical intervention for mental illness? Or that it's even a 'real' illness? Because that list is *much* bigger and isn't limited to fringe groups." No, that's not necessary. Lets just slow down here and look at the big picture. "Okay, but it doesn't seem like it gets any better, because James doesn't seem to have a very good handle on meteorology either with this, 'Elijah prayed it wouldn't rain for six months and it didn't' verse. Good luck redeeming *anything* in this passage pastor."

I hope you all realize that when I do that little routine of putting words in your mouths or ascribing feelings or beliefs that you may or may not have, I'm drawing on a collection of responses that I've heard over the course of thirty plus years of ministry. I know you're all smart and that you understand that Christianity isn't about belief, it's about faith. The founders of our movement used the principle of "faith seeking understanding." I just need to build a straw man to let you know how others respond to some of these more difficult passages. And yes, you can consider that a preacher secret! Preachers use straw men. Okay, since I've already put the concept of "faith seeking understanding" on the table, let's address it as it relates to the understanding of medicine, meteorology, physics, astronomy, cosmology, and a slew of other beliefs that people in the ancient world subscribed to.

Last week, I paid a visit to Sacred Grounds, our faith formation class that meets before this service. We talked a bit about how people in the ancient world believed that the earth was covered by a dome and that the stars were jewels that were set in the dome. They also believed that this dome shielded us from a source of water that was above the dome which is where we get rain. And there was also a source of water that was underneath the earth that seeps up from the ground and that's why we have lakes. But even before this collection of scriptures that we call the Old Testament came together around the third or fourth century BC, astronomers and scholars of that time had come to the understanding that the earth was a sphere. Was this modern geoscience? No. They believed everything rotated around the earth. But it was a start. It wasn't until 1543 that Copernicus figured out that the earth orbited the sun, not the other way around. That didn't go over so well with church folks in those days. Martin Luther, the founder of the Protestant movement, of which we are a part was trash-talking Copernicus. He said, "Even in these things that are thrown into disorder I believe the Holy Scriptures, for Joshua commanded the sun to stand still and not the earth." Ouch!

There has been a *long* history of the church pushing back on scientific discoveries that seemed contradictory to scripture. Since we mentioned Copernicus, we might as well mention Galileo too – He faced an inquisition in 1633 from the Catholic Church under Pope Urban VII and was convicted of "suspicion of heresy" because he kept perpetuating this idea that the earth revolved around the sun. Because of this, Galileo was denied a proper Catholic burial. And it wasn't until 1992 that the Catholic Church officially "forgave" him. Now here's something to think about - even though there were these amazing discoveries in astronomy and physics during the 1500s and 1600s, medical doctors were using bloodletting to treat diseases, and minor surgeries were being performed in barbershops using the same instruments that were used to cut hair and shave beards! It wasn't that long ago that we discovered things like penicillin and anesthesia and vaccinations which we take for granted these days. Shoot, it's only been in the lifetime of most folks in this room that doctors stopped using lobotomies to treat mental illness.

So let's not shame James for his lack of understanding and let's not obsess over the church's history of constantly pushing back on science because we might miss out on the truth of James' message.

In verse 16 James writes, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." Do we take this to mean that the more righteous a person is, the greater the likelihood that God will hear and act out on their prayers? How many times have we heard it said that something didn't work out in a person's favor because they didn't pray hard enough? Hopefully we haven't heard that in this church. On the flip side of that, how many times have we said that a person who has recovered from an illness was healed because we managed to pray hard enough to persuade God to intervene and change the laws of physics in order for our loved one to live? That makes God seem less like the source of life and love that binds us all together and more like Santa Claus. That sounds like if you pray earnestly and use the right words, and if you've earned enough reward points for Bible reading and good deeds, you might be able to cash in those points and get whatever you want. That's not the way prayer works. My straw man church person might say, "You're treading on some sacred ground here preacher. You think Galileo's 359 years of being on the outs with the church was over the top, just keep walking down this path and see how long it takes us to forgive you!"

Here's what I got out of our scripture lesson this week - Prayer uniquely binds human and divine activity together. What we say in prayer should be said as if it is before God, which may sound like a no-brainer until you think about it. If you were in the presence of God ... and I'm talking about - "there's God, right there in front of you" in however you envision God - what would you say or *not* say? And if you are unwilling to say it in God's presence- then don't. Remember the first lesson in James: words matter. Choose them wisely. The third lesson was, "How you use your words is important when you're trying to show the world that God's love for humanity is impartial." It's so easy and tempting to say things both in and out of the church that we would never say in the physical presence of God. I think what James is saying here is that a

worthwhile spiritual practice is to be attentive to your words and treat every word you speak even to others as a prayer. If you wouldn't say it in the presence of God, maybe it's not worth saying at all. And right there is your intersection where human and divine activity are bound.

Prayer is the activity of the *community* of faith. It's not an entirely private matter. I'm not saying you shouldn't pray by yourself or that somehow your prayers are ineffective if it's not done in a corporate setting. Jesus said that a person that's prone to pray loud prayers in public to show others how religious they are should just go into a room, shut the door and pray in private. What I'm trying to point out in this week's text is that all of the examples that James gives speak mostly to the community: If you have sinned - confess to one another. If you are sick - call the elders to be anointed. If you are suffering pray together. If you are happy - sing together. If we wanted to break it down into a slogan, we could say, "A community that prays together stays together."

I think an important question we need to ask ourselves is, "How often, when we get caught up in moments here in worship, do we forget our focus - prayer, praise, and caring for those who are in need?" Another question we can ask, especially as it relates to these last two verses is, "How much time do we spend judging one another and how much effort do we put into focusing on what others are doing wrong instead of asking how we might extend love, grace and forgiveness?" Here's a question we preachers need to ask - "What generates authentic transformation? Is it prophetic condemnation or pastoral presence?" Hopefully it's the latter, right? I think the most important lesson we can learn from the entire book of James is, "We can't do any of this alone." Are we able to learn how important our words are? For sure. But we can't do it alone. How are we going to know the power of our words and our responsibility to use our words wisely without each other? "Yes, but when we learn how *not* to use our words, it's usually because we've said something foolish to someone." Yup! Sounds like church to me! How are we supposed to learn how to discern Godly wisdom from worldly wisdom? It's usually when we do or say something foolish in church!

Yes it is! Isn't it nice that we have a safe space to make mistakes and learn from them? How are we going to learn these important lessons about the effectiveness of prayer and how not to use prayer as a weapon or as a measure of our worthiness? Well ... we learn it together as a church. Let our earnest and effective prayer this morning be, "God, make us instruments of your peace. Bind us together in love. Help us know that you hear and recognize our heart-felt petitions even when those petitions do not produce our desired outcome. Thank you for the comfort and strength of this community who gathers in the name of your Son, Jesus the Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen."