

Pastor's Message – 9/29/24
James 5:13-20

Next week, the 1st Sunday in October and always the first Sunday in October, is World Communion Sunday and in addition to those churches who may celebrate Communion every Sunday or on the first Sunday, many others, observing World Communion Sunday, will gather around the Lord's Table. Different churches, as you might imagine, have different practices and understanding of Communion. Some of those revolve around one particular verse in Scripture that has caused all kinds of problems. It is from Paul's 1st Letter to the Corinthians where he writes, "For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God's judgment upon yourself." (11:29)

Some have used that verse not to take Communion because they didn't feel worthy. Some Churches give Communion because they thought it was for only those people who sinned need Communion. Some will not take Communion since they hadn't sinned, they wouldn't need the grace offered in Communion. Some Churches will deny Communion to those who aren't members in good standing in that Church.

Communion is a moment of grace for us, so in this United Methodist Church, we practice an open table. All who repent of their sins and desire a closer relationship with Jesus are welcome to eat the bread and drink from the cup.

The Bible tells us that all have sinned; all have fallen short of the glory of God, so Communion is for everyone and offers grace and strength for our Christian living. James, today, writes to us both about confessing our sin and about the power of prayer. James advises us to confess our sins, not just to a priest or pastor, but to each other. Confession, admitting fault, all by itself can be difficult, but confessing to each other is an even harder sell.

Many of you pray for others, pray for one another, to be cured of illness, injury, and calamity quite regularly. How many of you confess your sins to one another—ever? The kind of Christian congregation James is addressing (typical of what we know of first- through early fourth-century Christian congregations, though less so from the evidence from the late third century than earlier) was likely quite small, and so also high-trust and high-touch. Our society has created an environment that discourages us from emotional and spiritual intimacy and keeps us at a distance from each other. People rarely talk about their faith. It may even be rarer for people to talk about their faith with those they are closer to and more easily share faith with strangers.

But what is prayer? What is it for? What does prayer do if it does

anything?

Have you ever seen an airplane being re-fueled in mid-air? I've seen it only on television and in pictures, and it is quite a sight. The plane bringing the fuel flies up beside or above the plane needing fuel and a long snake-like hose makes its way to the refueling point. The plane is filled up with jet fuel and the hose is recoiled before the helper plane goes back to where it came from. The plane that received the fuel is all set to continue flying.

Prayer, especially community prayer, can be like that – refueling the spiritually empty “tanks” in and around us. Folks may need someone to fly with them for a while because of a particular faith crisis, a loss or change in life, or simply an unexplained and unnamed despair. When one is living on nothing but fumes of hope, community prayer can refuel that person's spirit with the assurance of God's presence and the comfort of knowing that others care.

Prayer, as well as confession of sin, helps us to step outside ourselves, assess troubling situations, and take action when we can. But it also helps us to accept our inability to act when situations are outside our control. Prayer aligns us with the will and desire of God for healing and wholeness in human life, even when we are facing a terminal illness.

So how does prayer actually work? What makes it powerful and effective?

The power of prayer is not that it changes disease but that it changes us -- the people who pray. In prayer "you become connected to God. You become connected to the world. Your focus on self goes away and diminishes for the benefit of others."

Connection to God. Connection to the world around you. That's real change and true healing. As James writes to his fellow Christians, "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up" (v. 15). Prayer does not always lead to a cure, but it saves the sick by raising them into the presence of God.

Prayer changes the people who pray, making them more peaceful, accepting and aligned with their Christian convictions. Your brain on prayer may not kill cancer cells or convince God to cure you of your heart disease, but it might make you better able to face and to overcome your health challenges.

Fundamentally, prayer doesn't change the heart and mind of God, but it can change our own human heart and mind.

In the culture and time that this Letter of James was written, people who were sick (and this category would include all manner of sickness, including physical and mental disability as well as disease) were outcast from the community. Most people believed that if a person was ill, or crippled, or diseased, it was because he or she had sinned, or perhaps the parents of the person had committed sins, and the punishment had been handed on to the next generation.

It was the sick person's own fault that he or she was sick. Consequently, sick people were sent into quarantine, completely isolated from others, and left to their own devices to survive.

So, James is really swimming against the stream when he advises the Christian community to not only pray for the sick, but to lay hands on them and anoint them and care for them. Furthermore, he seems to suggest that caring for the suffering and sick is not only good for the victim, but also good for the caregiver and the community of faith as a whole.

How do we do as communities of faith when it comes to caring for the suffering and sick? My guess is that most of you probably do a good job of praying for those in need of healing. There have been a number of individuals and situations on the Intensive Prayer List for a long time, and that is updated weekly. Time is set aside in worship to share the concerns of the community and offer prayer for those in need. In addition, there are a number of people who comprise a "Prayer Chain" in the Church who spread the news of those who are in need of prayer. Every Church meeting begins and/or ends in prayer.

Sometimes, unfortunately, in some churches that's where it ends. Usually people think that it is the pastor's job to go and "lay hands" on the sick. Pastors are sometimes the only ones from the congregation who visit people in hospitals, pray with people before surgery, and visit the shut-ins.

That is not necessarily the case in this church. I hear of lots of visits taking place among members of the Church family and visits beyond the church family. It is often the case that when I visit someone in the hospital or at home that I hear of others who have visited before me. That's what James is talking about. He encourages everyone of our prayer responsibilities.

James' apparent aside describing Elijah makes this latter point plain. James begins this aside by describing Elijah not as an official (he was not, after all, a priest in the official roll of priests but a citizen emboldened and enabled somehow to speak on God's behalf to the king, see I Kings 17:1 ff.), but as "a person just like us." He prayed, the rain stopped, and famine ensued. He prayed again, the rain resumed, and the famine ended. He's just like us, no higher, no lower, James says. His point: if we confess our sins to one another and pray for one another, God will listen, and good things will happen. So, everyone should do this, as a matter of course!

Praying for the sick so they can be raised up, and perhaps also forgiven, was considered simply an intrinsic part of the ministry of "elders" in the time of James. We should not directly equate "elders" in the first century context with the "professional pastors" in our current context. What we know in this early period is that elders appear to have been ordained (that is, prayed over for the Holy Spirit to empower their ministry), but that there would likely have been several elders

(not just one) in each Christian community, and that none of them necessarily functioned quite as “the” pastor in our current contexts. James encourages all of you to consider your call as an “elder.”

Some churches invite people to print out prayer requests on cards to be read at the appropriate time. Some churches expect the worship leader or the pastor to speak all prayer requests. Some churches pray as part of a prescribed format. I believe that it is part of everyone’s ministry to pray: for each other and for the concerns of the church, the community, and the world. Prayers of petition, concern, thanksgiving, joy are all part of the expression of our faith. Praying aloud in a time of community prayer makes these prayers part of the life of the church and they become the prayers of the whole church.

Prayer can heal us, even when it doesn't cure us of our illness. It changes our brains, our hearts, our souls, turning us into people who get outside of ourselves to form deeper connections with God and with the people around us. Prayer is powerful and effective because it gives us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can and wisdom to know the difference.

Prayer also gives us the opportunity to confess our sins and receive forgiveness, freeing us from the guilt and regret that can eat us up like a cancer.

Hymn #352 reads, “It’s me, it’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.” We all stand, sit, and kneel in need of prayer. We all stand in need of the healing power that the presence of God offers. Healing and wholeness come to us in many ways. One of those ways is, as James suggests, anointing with oil in the name of the Lord. Oil has no magical power, but it is a way of connecting our souls to the presence of God around and within us.

I believe we need to keep praying: praying for our church, praying for our youth and our children, praying for the sick and praying for each other. Every Sunday – every day – I believe we need to be in prayer. What will happen to our church if we stop praying? What can happen if we stop singing? What can happen if we stop confessing our sins and acknowledging that we stand in the need of a connection – we need God?

Perhaps you’ve seen the yard signs in the community which read, “Keep Praying.” What can happen if we start and keep praying? What can happen if we keep singing? What can happen if we start confessing our sins and acknowledging that we stand in the need of a connection with God – that we need God for everything?

Confession and prayer are God’s ways of mid-air refueling for those who put their hope and trust in Him and submit to His plan and desire for us. Those who wander can be brought back and the rains can come: the rain of God’s grace, forgiveness and love.