

A Community of Prayer

I hope you've found some things that are useful to you in the Book of James, as we've surveyed it over the last four Sundays. As I said when we began, one of the things that's always appealed to me about this book is its very common sense, practical approach to life in Christ. There aren't a lot of rhetorical flourishes or theological musings in James. Of course, some of the advice James gives only looks like common sense when viewed through the lens of faith in God and in Jesus. As I mentioned last week, the conventional wisdom of the world would provide us with very different answers indeed to some of the situations on which James advised his readers.

Certainly some of James' advice in this morning's reading doesn't seem very practical to modern ears. "Are any among you suffering? They should pray." That's not what we're used to hearing. These days, it seems that if anyone is suffering, the first thing they do is figure out who's to blame (it's never themselves) and to contact a lawyer to see how much they can get in a civil suit. Prayer would be the furthest thing from their minds. I like the fact that James begins his closing section with this admonition because it ties in very closely with the very first thing he says after he introduces himself and his audience in chapter one. The lectionary skipped the first part of chapter one, as you may recall, and I said four weeks ago that I would try to get back to it. Here it is: "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing."

I confess I have a very ambiguous response to that passage. There is something in me that recognizes the deep wisdom of what James says. The core idea, that suffering is in some odd way good for us, was reworked some 120 years ago by the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche as "What does not kill me, makes me stronger." I doubt, though, that Nietzsche was consciously repeating James. The stoic pragmatism of the idea is certainly in wide use today. But to count trials as joys? That's hard. It requires a deep faith; the kind that Jesus pointed out is natural for children but is often hard-won for adults. Making prayer our automatic response to suffering may come easier than rejoicing, but it still calls on us to respond to the negative happenings in our life from our faith and not from anger or any reciprocal kind of negativity.

I have an equally ambiguous response to what James has to say about prayer and healing. Indeed, as we've discussed in Sunday School and seen in countless articles in the newspaper, magazines and other media, most Christians in the modern Western world share these feelings of ambiguity about the role prayer and faith play in healing. It's important to remember, of course, that James wasn't writing to 21st Century American Christians, but to a first century audience who took it for granted that physical and spiritual sickness were closely intertwined. His audience, though, wasn't a group of superstitious primitives. If we look back at the wisdom literature in the Old Testament and apocrypha, which we've found clearly influenced James, we find this in the Wisdom of Sirach: "My child, when you are ill, do not delay, but pray to the Lord, and he will heal you. Give up your faults and direct your hands rightly, and cleanse your heart from all sin. Offer a sweet-smelling sacrifice, and a memorial portion of choice flour, and pour oil on your offering, as much as you can afford. Then give the physician his place, for the Lord created him; do not let him leave you, for you need him." This recognition of the complex relationship between physical health and spiritual and mental health is especially being recaptured in today's schools of holistic and naturopathic medicine. I don't think there is a doctor practicing anywhere who would deny the role of stress in such physical conditions as high

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blood pressure, muscular strain and diabetes. Our physical health is often reliant on our mental and spiritual health; something easy to remember when we consider that the concept is built into our very language. The English words healing, health, wholeness and holy are all derived from a single ancient Germanic root.

But in addition to our modern uncertainty about the role of faith and prayer in healing, there is also what the British scholar Ralph P. Martin calls “the built-in ambiguity” of James’ discussion of prayer for healing. Martin writes, “Is it a cure of the whole person that is promised, or is it the assurance of divine faithfulness that a desire for healing, expressed in faith, will not go unheeded by God, who at the last day will raise the dead?” You may remember that we discovered Paul’s use in the opening of Ephesians of what are now known as the Eighteen Benedictions in Jewish worship and Martin points to James’ possible use of the second of the Eighteen: “Blessed art thou, O Lord, who makest alive the dead.” Now, we could go around the room this morning and gather stories for both sides of this apparent ambiguity. We know from our own lives that there are those cases which doctors cannot explain of seemingly miraculous recoveries, some of which we’ve prayed for together in this very room. But we also know well that not all of our prayers for health are answered, that even young and vital people with strong faith do die.

The presence of tragedy in our lives is why James felt it necessary to exhort his readers to look for the joy in the midst of trial and it may be why he calls for the sick to be anointed with oil in this passage. The use of oil as a medicine in Biblical times is certainly well attested. In giving voice to God’s description of the rebellious nature of Judah, Isaiah describes the nation as a wounded body: “From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds; they have not been drained, or bound up, or softened with oil.” In Jesus’ well-known story of the Good Samaritan, that unlikely hero tends to the injured traveler by binding up his wounds and pouring on oil and wine. But we Baptists probably need to be reminded that many of our more liturgical brothers and sisters still use oil for its other common Old and New Testament purpose: anointing in times of celebration, honor and joy. As seems to always be the case with James, there are a wealth of verses in the Wisdom books of the Old Testament that link oil with God’s love and rejoicing as well as examples in the teaching of his brother, Jesus. We’re probably all familiar with the example in the 23rd Psalm, “God anoints my head with oil, my cup overflows.” Psalm 133 uses oil as a symbol of joy in community: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity! It is like precious oil upon the head.” Proverbs reminds us that “Oil and perfume make the heart glad,” and even the often dour Ecclesiastes advises, “let oil not be lacking on your head.” Jesus called for his disciples to anoint their heads with oil and wash their faces when fasting, rather than looking dismal like the fasting hypocrites trying to gain the notice of others. It seems to me that what James is doing here is reminding us that even when we are sick enough to be confined to bed, we have much to rejoice in, thanks to the love of God. Ralph Martin describes the scene: “the elders bring and apply to the afflicted one the outward tangible sign of God’s covenant faithfulness in regard to human distress, and the pledge that, in adversity as in happiness, God’s plan does not miscarry.” In his commentary on this passage, Lawrence Moore calls in no uncertain terms for a return to this ancient tradition by today’s church: “we ought to do far more anointing, laying on hands and praying for healing – not because there are any guarantees, or to prove something about God, or for any reason other than that it is a sign of the kingdom of salvation, liberation, wholeness, justice and peace proclaimed by Jesus. What happens then is

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ultimately up to God. At the end of the day,” Moore writes, “God is God, like it or lump it. The Lord healeth and the Lord healeth not. Blessed be the name of the Lord!” Now, that’s the kind of good, practical advise I expect to find from James and those who preach from him.

If James has in mind the restoration of joy in the midst of trouble with his advice to anoint the sick with oil, there is also another kind of restoration potentially provided by this scenario. “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them.” This is what Luke Timothy Johnson of Atlanta’s Candler School of Theology calls “James empower(ing) the sick themselves with regard to the assembly.” There is a tendency among some of us to withdraw when we are in trouble. We get it into our heads that our problems, our illness, whatever it is, make us less than desirable companions. We’re ashamed of ourselves, logically or not, and so we create a self-fulfilling prophecy. No one’s going to want to be around us, so we just won’t be around anyone. But James knows what we really need when we are sick or in trouble is the love of our community. This is why we are to call out to our brothers and sisters in Christ, to let them stand in solidarity with us, to remind us of their love and the love of God for us. We have a claim on each other in this community and when trouble comes is when we need to exercise it most, not abandon it. Actually, I think that’s something that Good Shepherd does really well. The time of sharing joys and concerns was a little intimidating to me at first, because it meant that I had to learn everybody’s name fast. But it also meant that I got to know things about you all quickly, too – what you have to celebrate, what it is that shadows your hearts. And it is a big part of the secret to this community, the sense of family that this church has maintained over the years, how such an often-disparate group has found and kept a true unity.

James overriding advice in this passage is simple: pray, pray, pray. Are you suffering? Pray and have the church pray for you. Are things going well? Sing your prayers of praise. Pray for each other when you have made mistakes and let your spirits and your relationships be healed. This last is James’ positive advice to go along with some negative admonitions from earlier in this book. In two passages that we’ve not looked at in the last month, James warns Christians against slandering each other or grumbling about each other. Chapter 4, verses 11 & 12 says, “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?” In verse 9 of chapter 5, James writes, “Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors!” If we are slandering our brothers and sisters or grumbling about them, we stand in danger of judgment. It is only when we enter into the spirit of compassionate prayer for each other that we are truly living with each other as Jesus would have us do. I think a group of believers that pray for each other with the frequency and fervency that Good Shepherd exercises is probably in less danger of falling into slander and grumblings than most churches.

For James, this spirit of compassionate prayer also means compassionate action. James calls us to go to those who are “wandering from the truth” and to bring them back. For too many of us, this may sound like exercising the inappropriate judging that James has earlier warned against. Who are we to tell someone else that they are not on the true path? Once again, I think the key to James’ thought is found in one of the Wisdom books. James says that this proactive approach

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“will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” That last phrase comes from Proverbs 10:12: “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins.” Love is the key. If we see that our sister or brother is transgressing God’s law of love and if we reach out to them in love, then we avoid evil and align ourselves with God’s love. I spoke earlier of the restoration of joy and the restoration of community. Now James calls us to prayerfully, actively seek out those who need restoration to joy, to community, to love. James harbors no illusions about humankind’s propensity to wander into sinful, broken, destructive behavior. This most practical of apostles understands that the only solution to the myriad of ills that human beings experience and create is God’s love and an active human response to it. Throughout his ministry, James’ brother Jesus actively sought to bring men and women into loving relationship with God and each other, restoring the right relationships God had intended from the beginning, inaugurating the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community. Now James calls on us to do the same, to follow in Jesus’ steps.

There is plenty that separates Christians this morning. We are separated by variations in theology, in politics, even -- despite the advances of the last 40 years -- by race. We are separated by simple distance as well and by our national cultures. Our celebration of World Communion Sunday is just one small gesture towards the elimination of some of these barriers. But none of these barriers is insurmountable if we follow the call of James to be a community of compassion and prayer. If we genuinely seek each other, all of our sisters and brothers, all of our neighbors, to be a part of one community, if we do so in the spirit of compassion and prayer, then slowly, eventually, we will find what we are looking for. This is the promise of Jesus in whom, Paul wrote to the Colossians, “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” It was for this reason that Jesus had his disciples prepare an upper room for their feast together, where he washed their feet and gave them his body and his blood to eat and to drink. It is this promise that we remember this morning, along with Christians all over the world, as we celebrate the Lord’s Supper together, as we enter into the spirit of communion community.

Will we be able to maintain that loving spirit all day, every day, from now until we reach the ends of our journeys? Of course not. Will troubles come to challenge our assurance of God’s love and our place in God’s will. Absolutely. But each time we come together as a community in love and prayer, we strengthen ourselves and each other for the days ahead. The bread and juice before us remind us of the one to whom we owe our allegiance and love and just how much he loved and loves us. We and our brothers and sisters of all denominations around the globe take these elements in the always-fertile hope of joy, whatever our circumstances may be. Thanks be to God!