

First Presbyterian Church Birmingham, MI
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Whose Friend Are You?

James 5: 13-20

One thing appears certain. Praying for the sick does not always result in their cure from disease. In fact, I suspect all of us have prayed for a person to be healed of a disease, without seeing the result we were praying for, and we have experienced this disappointment and sadness many times. Clearly, James believes that prayer brings God's healing power. But when we carefully examine vv. 13-16, we find important layers of theology which demonstrate that James is not using our perceived success at praying for others as a test of our faith. On the contrary, James wants us to know that faith results in acts of love. These acts are powerful medicine for individuals and for the church as a whole. Remember that James is an action-oriented person. Those who focus on faith, rather than the works that derive from faith, often prefer to ignore the Letter of James.

James makes three fundamental points in the verses we read. First, he tells us that confessing how we as a body are not right with God is a prerequisite for healing. Second, the ill individual must seek out the elders

of the church for prayer and anointing. Third, the elders must confess their sins to one another and pray for one another, to experience physical and/or spiritual healing. All of this is a bit alien to our culture. We no longer see a connection between sin and sickness--so why this need for confession? And I suspect few in the congregation have invited the church elders into their home to pray for them and anoint them with oil. Nor do we confess our sins to one another except for a general corporate confession--exposing our sins to others would be very risky. Can we really trust others with our deepest embarrassments? We do hope that "the prayer of faith will save the sick" (to quote James), but we want it to be a private request between an individual and God.

James is talking about something different. He is talking about community solidarity in which you welcome the church elders into your sphere of vulnerability. There is then a confession of shared vulnerability and a reminder of God's mercy through anointing. James wants people to know that God is a God of grace who loves us and gives us gifts.

Sometimes, we feel that what we desire from God is not what we get, but God is continuously blessing the faith community, the body of Christ, and we need to constantly shift our minds from ourselves and our personal anguish to the community of faith with its shared vulnerability and shared

blessing. *That* is what brings us back to *this* place or, if you are a visitor from another church, wherever you find spiritual nourishment in a community of believers. We sense, correctly, that there is strength in what we share together in the name of Jesus Christ.

The Letter of James has been described as a call to conversion. He asks Christians to seek the wisdom of God and reject the wisdom of the world. What this means in objective terms [Please read the entire Letter of James] is a rejection of riches and anything that puts distance between the members of the community. Prayer is seen as something that shapes a particular type of community--one in which people are committed to each other. Prayer is an action that reconnects people to the body when disease or disability isolates them. In a very real sense, prayer is a treatment for the toxicities of the world--all those things which set us apart from the body: hatred, envy, bickering--and, yes, illness, too.

The challenge of illness, particularly life-threatening illness, is to believe God is present when the future looks dark. The real test of faith is how we each respond in the face of death. We can accept certain things as a given: We are all guilty of actions that separate us from God (sin); we will all experience illness and disability; we will all die. When faced with illness, disability, and/or death, do we behave like friends of the world or

friends of God? Do we choose self-interest or the health of that which we share in the body of Christ?

When we examine the Letter of James and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we find three critical elements involved in being a friend of God--in other words, choosing the wisdom of God over the wisdom of the world. First, the friend of God affirms solidarity with the community of faith. He or she is not just an individual with personal desires and ambitions. Each is a member of the body of Christ--equal in purpose, in call, and in value. But more importantly this solidarity empowers the Christian to call on other members for prayer. You see, James asks those who are sick to “call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them” as a sign of communal solidarity. The logic of the world is often to isolate the sick. Not so for the church. We gather around the sick, says James, to recognize and confess the weakness and failure of all and to proclaim that Christ forgives us and raises us up. In that solidarity healing is experienced, even if death is the outcome. Furthermore, even if, or particularly if, a sick person feels isolated and can't summon the church to provided the needed care, the church must take that responsibility.

Second, the friend of God places the interests of the sick and the weak above self-interest. In this day, with all the concern about an H1N1

pandemic, this is a *bold* claim. Not too long ago I led a class for young doctors about the requirements of medical professionalism in a pandemic. One scenario involved the choice between remaining available to care for patients versus getting one's family with one's own vulnerable young children to a safer location. Of course, we know what professionalism demands: Patients come first. My friend, Jeffrey Maisels, Chairman of Pediatrics at Beaumont--Royal Oak, tells about his experience as Chief of Neonatology at Hershey Medical Center at the time of the Three Mile Island nuclear accident in 1979. People began evacuating from the Hershey area, and Dr. Maisels remembers seeing some physicians simply get in their cars and leave. He and a few others safely evacuated all the babies from the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. Does Christian discipleship affirm that it is better to lose one's own life in service to others than to save one's life? Of course, but a community of faith can help each other achieve this goal. James reminds us that it is what we *do* with our lives through acts of love that is the measure of our faith. These acts of love don't save us; but they define who we are.

Third, the friend of God recognizes that every illness has a spiritual dimension. The friend of the world sees no such connection. Illness is viewed as a biological breakdown that can hopefully be repaired by human

intervention. The friend of God values modern medicine and seeks the help of physicians. Belief in God does not require a rejection of the benefits found in the world. But the friend of God depends on God's presence, God's leading, God's connection with us through the Spirit to give meaning and purpose to life, even when the friends of the world say, "There is no hope." James writes, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." I believe that what he means is this: When our prayers conform to the mind of God, when we pray as friends of God, our hope to remain in God's eternal presence will be confirmed. We may or may not be healed of a disease with the medical interventions available to us, but God will enable us to embrace the life God has given us as trusting recipients and servants of God's grace. Spiritual health, especially in a time of illness, is to experience God's presence and the power to embrace our life together as the connected body of Christ.

Father Henri Nouwen has a beautiful way of describing what prayer and Christian community is all about. In an edited book of his writings, *Seeds of Hope*, he speaks of the power in the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth in the Gospel of Luke. You remember that Mary went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, to share the words of promise she had received from the angel Gabriel. When they greet each other, the child Elizabeth is carrying

leaps for joy, and Elizabeth calls Mary, “Blessed.” Mary responds with great joy. They each help the other wait for promises to be fulfilled. Nouwen writes that prayer is the affirmation of a promise that is really happening. He goes on: “The whole meaning of the Christian community lies in offering a space in which we wait for what we have already seen. Christian community is the place where we keep the flame alive among us and take it seriously so that it can grow and become stronger in us. In this way we can live with courage, trusting that there is a spiritual power in us that allows us to live in this world without being seduced constantly by despair, lostness, and darkness....Waiting together, nurturing what has already begun, expecting its fulfillment--that is the meaning of marriage, friendship, community, and the Christian life.” [Seeds of Hope (1989), p. 106]

Now, I want you to know that I see seeds of hope and acts of love all around this congregation. The Spirit of God is in this place. It is not the new sanctuary or the new organ that gives me this feeling, though they create a wonderful worship space. It is the relationships I experience here: people who provide food for others; people who minister to children and youth; people who visit and serve the elderly; people who sing passionately

of God's love and grace; people who spend time with those who need a comforting human presence; people who want this church to provide accommodations for any human need in children or adults. The list is long. James tells us we are on the right track. The prayers of those who are friends of God are powerful and effective, and the community which lives to serve God through acts of love will not be disappointed.

So--whose friend are you? May we all be friends of God and agents of Jesus Christ: praying for one another, confessing our shared vulnerability, performing acts of love in Christ's name, and rejoicing in the power of the Spirit in the church. Amen.