

This morning we come to the end of our series on the Letter of James. Maybe by now we've discovered that God through James has a way of making us all uncomfortable- of stepping on our toes? James never minces words. As a matter of fact, in its slim 108 total verses, the book of James contains more than 50 imperatives or commands" (Ronald J. Allen, *The Preacher's Bible Handbook*). In verse 12 of James' final chapter, we find the words "above all else," a "common marker for highlighting the end of an ancient letter" (Gay Byron, workingpreacher.org) and also a hint that the main point of the letter is coming. And in these last eight verses of James' letter, James calls his congregation, mostly made up of poor, displaced people, back to the main point- the wisdom of God is found through prayer and care for one another. Whether in trying times or happy, we're called to lift up our hearts and voices to God. In other words, all of the circumstances of our lives are circumstances for prayer. Therefore, before turning to God's word for us this day, first let us pray. **PRAY.** Listen to a word from God found in the closing section of the letter of James 5:13-20. **READ.**

Leonard Cohen writes, "The blizzard of the world has crossed the threshold and it has overturned the order of the soul." "Today we live in a blizzard of another sort: it swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence, and their inevitable outcome: war. It swirls within us as frenzy, greed and deceit, and indifference to the suffering of others. We all know stories of people who have wandered off into this madness and been separated from their own souls. These wanderers come from every walk of life. Though it can be

easy to believe the poet's claim that 'the blizzard of the world' has overturned 'the order of the soul,' yet as followers of Christ, we know differently" (Parker Palmer, *Hidden Wholeness*). James puts forward an alternative vision of Christian community, trusting that God is able to bring about well-being and wholeness even in the blizzard- even under the worst personal or social conditions (vv. 15-17). If COVID has taught us anything it's that we are all tied together in our rejoicing and in our suffering and that prayer is powerful, especially when it's done in the midst of community. Through prayer the community orders and reorders itself as an assembly of equals. Although we may come from different walks of life, in God's name we're all sisters and brothers. Prayer isn't just for people who have it all together. Prayer isn't just us calling out in the shadows to a distant God. No. Prayer means what it means and does what it does because God is, as James promises, very near to the heart of those who draw near to Him. Some may say this sounds too simplistic. But is it? Why is it we can look at a child and we can see the power in the imperfections of their prayers and yet, as we become older, we get so wrapped up in "it's got to be just this way" before we can pray. "I don't pray as good as so-and-so." "I don't know what to pray about" or "I can't pray period." We all make up excuses. We forget that we reorient ourselves with God- individually and communally through imperfect prayer yet, Jesus did give us the Lord's Prayer when all else fails.

Prayer is a spiritual practice in which all ages from all walks of life can participate and are empowered to carry out Christ's mission. **Prayer**

changes relationships and lives. And according to James, when we're faithful or righteous, prayer is also powerful and effective (v. 16b). James uses the story of Elijah as an example of the power of prayer among human beings. Being righteous in our praying isn't about perfection; it's about devotion and obedience. Remember that "we serve a God who took a small child and placed that child in the midst of all. We serve a God who was deeply encouraged by the tiny offering of an impoverished widow. We serve a God who loved the broken prayer of an outcast most than the confident eloquence of a Pharisee. God doesn't care if our songs are off-key. God cares if our songs and prayers are offered whole-heartedly" (craiggreenfield.com). And part of offering whole-hearted songs and prayers is to be obedient and part of being obedient is confessing what we've done wrong. Confession, coupled with prayer, leads to healing. Therefore, "these things should be our practice as individuals and as a congregation, if we are truly to walk in James' concept of godly wisdom" (Feasting on the Word, Kathy Dawson, p. 114).

"These things" also include the anointing of oil in the Lord's name and going after one who has wandered away from their faith and their community. These concrete actions bear witness to God's redeeming, restorative, and healing work in the world. Yes, healing. Now James isn't just talking about an activity that takes place largely between patients and physicians, as the central image for people who follow Jesus is not always cure but wholeness. When James talks about prayer saving the sick and the Lord raising them up many scholars believe this

to also be a reference to salvation and resurrection or eternal life. Therefore, even if the physical healing does not come, there is hope in God's promise of wholeness in the life to come. Also "drawing on our Jewish heritage, we envision human wholeness chiefly in terms of right relationships with God and our neighbors. We believe in what Jews call *Shalom*- an all-embracing peace that spells the end of meaningless suffering- to be the ultimate reality. And we believe in the resurrection of the body, which will embrace new life both the psychological and the strictly physical dimensions of our being" (John Koenig, *Practicing Our Faith*). God's saving work continues in the involvement and actions of a caring community that exercises its actions confidently in the name of Jesus. In other words, the prayers of the community- over time- begin to shape and heal us as a congregation and allow us to become more nearly the body of Christ. I experienced this when I was serving as a campus minister at Vanderbilt. Every Tuesday night at the close of worship, we'd move from the chapel into the entryway for prayer. We would hold hands in a circle- sometimes up to 50 of us- and we would not so eloquently pray with open eyes our joys and our concerns. A few students would rush in last minute after a night lab or athletic or band practice just to make the closing circle prayer. On one particular night, silence filled the room as Ashley joined us for prayer. It had been a month or so since Ashley had lost both of her parents in a plane accident over Spring Break. As we circled up for prayer, you could feel the uncertainty and grief in the air. It was palpable, and Ashley began to weep. We held her in our spoken and silent prayers. Another student, Chris, who had just lost his aunt who we had been praying for to cancer,

went over and held Ashley in an embrace. None of us could fix Chris nor Ashley's hurt or pain. All we could do was show God's love by being with and praying with & for them and each other. Afterwards Ashley shared with me how good and hard it was to return to worship and how she felt an ever slight healing from her deep grief as we prayed. Chris, a curious searcher of the faith, commented that strangely, in the very expression of the communal grief and pain that night, God's love had welled up in those who had gathered in prayer to heal and renew us. "In early Christian communities and for roughly the first three centuries of the church's life, Christians regarded healing by prayer and the anointing of oil as a normal part of the church's mission. Today we fulfill our call to be healers in many different ways. Some of us offer healing to one another in recovery groups such as AA or NA or by picking up someone's medicine or paying for it or serving in a medical or helping profession or by telling someone where they can get help- where they can begin the path to wholeness. My grandmother used to speak a good bit about "talking the talk and walking the walk." I can hear her saying this as I read these final verses in James- except in my mind, I've reversed it to read, "Walking the walk, talking the talk." We have to walk our faith as we talk our faith. We may stutter or stumble as we pray or as we sing or as we confess, or as we take the risk to go after those who have wandered away or are the wanderers ourselves. Reversing the order is a simple reminder to me that James calls us to faith in action. He says we must be "doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves" (1:22) and that "mercy triumphs over judgment every time" (2:13). "Don't say evil things about each other,"

says James (4:11) and “look for godly wisdom from above” (3:17). If we can keep these things in mind, and we’re willing to take risks and humble ourselves, we can walk and talk in good faith. And prayer is a great way to do both of those things.

We have index cards in the pews for anyone who would like prayer each week. Just write your prayer request on it and place it in an offering pouch. You can sign your name or not, and we pray these prayers at our weekly staff meetings. Some of us may be more private, especially when we’re sick or when we’ve done something wrong and are embarrassed or ashamed or isolated and yet the act of vulnerability in asking for prayer is a hard but beautiful thing. Also, to surround and not forget those who have walked away from the faith community is also a healing and powerful thing. Maybe that’s why James mentions both the sinful and sick together? Because both the sick and the sinful may feel exposed?! Some people get mixed up that sinfulness and sickness always go together. That’s not what James is saying here. He is talking about prayers for restoration not condemnation. I visited with someone a few weeks ago who was talking about ending their life because they were convinced that they were in a very difficult place in life and were suffering from illness and having bad things happen to them because God was punishing them for their sins. I told them that I don’t believe in a God who operates that way. I believe in a loving God who intends for us to know that we’re beloved and forgiven and who desires for us to be made whole. This person didn’t feel worthy. As the tears fell from both of our eyes, we prayed together for them to be released from the hold of

drugs and alcohol and other addictions and for God to make them whole- to restore their desire to live as well as to restore their desire to be in a faith community and to accept that they were a beloved, forgiven child of God. James knows that there is hope and power in prayer. How can we continue to faithfully pray- in the name of the Lord- for one another in this community of faith? Today during the offering the clergy staff and seminary intern will offer to pray for and anoint with oil anyone in need of healing or restoration. If you would like prayer, please come up to the altar and one of us will pray with you and anoint you. Faith in action bears witness to the healing and reconciling power of Christ in the world. May we all walk the walk and talk the talk of God's way of life together. Amen.