

“When to Pray, Friend”

Salado UMC—30 September 2018: 19th after Pentecost

Preaching Text: James 5:13-20—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

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**“If the only prayer you ever say in your whole life is ‘thank you,’
that would suffice”— (Meister Eckhart).**

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Hear our day’s lesson:

13 Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 14 Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, 20 you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (James 5:13-20).

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In today’s lesson from James, seven instances of “pray/prayer” occur in these eight verses. May we focus our attention on James’ conclusion. We find few persons who do not speak about prayer on occasion. They may say “it was an answer to a prayer” or about a quarterback that “just threw up a prayer.” If we were to ask what prayer is, honestly most of us would answer that we do not know enough about prayer to speak of it with authority. Yes, of course, the Bible addresses prayer. We pray in worship and elsewhere. Yet even lifelong Jews, the disciples for example, ask Jesus: “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1)? Naturally we seek explanation for what we do not understand. When a life ends before its time; when children suffer, or trouble “pursues” us wherever we go, we want someone to tell us “why.” In fact, the book of Job is a long attempt to answer that painful question.

After World War II, when German atrocities against the Jews came to light; when the world learned that 6+ million Jewish people died in the concentration camps, an old Rabbi, who had senselessly lost so many that he loved, said to his son:

When I get to heaven, I am going to march straight up to God and grab his beard and shout into his ear: “Why did you let it happen? Why? Tell me!!”

With the same sense of outraged justice, the African-American preacher in James Weldon Johnson's poem, "The Crucifixion" challenged God:

O look at black-hearted Judas sneaking through the dark of the garden, leading his crucifying mob!! O God, strike him down! Why don't you strike him down before he plants his traitor's kiss upon my Jesus' cheek?

Certainly, we are outraged at the apparent injustice of pain and suffering. It is our nature to ask an unambiguous "why?" Yet the answer to that question is that we do not have the answer. The likelihood of getting an adequate answer seems slim. The problem of evil has frustrated our best earthly minds through the ages.

Faith comforts us that there is meaning behind our suffering, injustice, and inexplicable tragedies. Yet, even in the most faithful, anxiety reigns because we cry out for tangible proof that it is all going to be okay. Our hearts seek hope. We believe that all our questions will get answers that will make sense. We hope this is true. I believe that is true, but none of us can "prove" that it is true.

While we do not have the answer, we have enough "answer" to carry us through our "vale of tears." Perhaps we can land safe on heaven's far shore, where we shall understand even as we are now understood. In Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus we see as much light as we can from our human dimension. Jesus plainly reminds us that being righteous, godly, and Christian does not spare us from trials and troubles common to all people. Trouble, like rain, falls on the just and unjust. Being good does not pardon the Christian from such pain and suffering as normally falls upon others.

We will be distressed from economic setbacks. Except for his robe, Jesus had nothing to divide at his death. Paul died penniless. Peter was obliged to say at the Gate Beautiful: "Silver and gold have I not." Contrary to the way we would have planned it: the righteous do not always prosper; and the wicked don't always fail.

We shall suffer at the hands of people, from the religious and secular authorities. A Christian is subject to suffering in home life. Who knows the great trauma that arises when Christians experience separation/divorce? Being a Christian does not mean that you will not have home trouble. John Wesley's life proves this tenet.

So . . . from James' perspective—and perhaps our own—when we Christians cannot get answers from human wisdom, then where do we go? We go to the One to whom the psalmist prayed: "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence" (Psalm 139:7)? Clearly Jesus accepts the reality of human suffering. He does not account for it, and candidly Jesus does not explain it away. Hear what E. Stanley Jones (1884–1973) the great Methodist missionary said about Jesus' method:

If Jesus had undertaken to explain it, his Gospel would have become a philosophy—in which case it would not have been a Gospel. A philosophy undertakes to explain everything and then leaves everything as it was. Jesus undertook to explain little, but he changed everything in sight. He did not bring a philosophy, but a fact. The fact was Jesus' method of meeting pain and injustice was to transform them into something higher. The Good News is not merely good views (E. Stanley Jones, *Christ and Human Suffering*, Abingdon Press, 1933, p. 37).

Jesus' love shows us a transformation by which God can change injustice and suffering into forces serving a higher good. Jesus takes the evil perpetrated upon himself and uses it. In the Gospels we see

that almost everything beautiful comes from something ugly. Criticisms leveled against Jesus to ruin his good name, Jesus takes and uses to reveal God's divine heart. Jesus did not just bear the criticism, he used it.

Prayer ties us to God's heart. Without prayer the human-divine connection becomes unlikely. Prayer offers access that which we need to access. The always thoughtful Abraham Lincoln once remarked of prayer: "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day."

The Celtic writer John Philip Newell styled his approach to prayer this way:

I see the practice of prayer as allowing the deepest part of us to come up into awareness and expression. Prayer is not about beseeching a distant one to alter the mystery of reality, but rather prayer is about coming into tune with the deepest energies within us—the energies that I believe are of the One. The practice of prayer is bringing us back into relationship with that which is already among us and within us.

Presbyterian ethicist, Mark Douglas, also writes:

. . . we can note that though James' emphasis on prayer ends the book, it does not really close the book. Indeed, the writer of James faces a conundrum: how to end a text about something that does not, itself, end. Heavenly wisdom, after all, is never exhausted. His solution is to use prayer to bring the book full circle without bringing it to a conclusion. Thus, a book that begins in address to those who are dispersed (1:1) ends with blessings promised to "whoever brings back a sinner from wandering" (5:20).

While James spends almost no time in describing eschatology ("doctrine of the last things"), in an odd way, the book has the effect of exemplifying it. The abruptness of the closing verses can remind us that things are not yet ended, that the world is still full of sin, death, and those who wander, but that the wise Christian can, in and through prayer, continue to engage the world in hope for a time when what has splintered can be reunited (*Feasting on the Word*, electronic version).

James' last eight verses end with James summoning his people to return to God's wisdom. Their local neighbor's wisdom has gotten them into all kinds of trouble. The lesson reminds us of the trouble: divisions that sin and sickness have caused. Typically, as we have seen the last five weeks, James does not try to explain. James instead gives his congregation particular things to do: pray for each another, sing songs of praise, call for the elders, anoint with oil, confess to one another, and bring the wanderers back home. No wonder James has the reputation for being practical. Our series title has been "Epistles Offer Practical Guidance." James certainly lives up to that portrayal.

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