

“Praying”

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Psalm 124

James 5:13-16

I was first called to serve a church early in my seminary career, long before my ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. A person who is not yet ordained cannot moderate the meetings of the session of the church. Therefore, an ordained minister was appointed to be moderator while I was still in seminary. This minister, who was serving as chaplain of the church-affiliated university where Kristi was on the faculty, came to all of the meetings and guided me as I learned about moderating session meetings. In one session meeting, an elder mentioned that he was going to be having some medical procedure that week and asked for our prayers. We all agreed that we would pray, and then started to move along with other business before the session. It was at that point that the minister, Rev. Anne Hames, interrupted the regular flow of business. I don't recall her exact words, but she said something like “instead of us all just saying we're *going to pray* for Joe, why don't we stop and do that right now? In fact, why don't we lay hands on Joe like James told us to do?” And, with that, the elders all stopped the business at hand and got to the *real* business at hand. We gathered around Joe, laid our hands on him, and prayed. Years later, I have no idea what the next item on the agenda was scheduled to be, but I vividly remember praying over Joe. I remember the tears that streamed down his face. I remember the lesson I learned that day. And I remember that Joe's procedure went well.

James says if anyone is suffering, they should pray. If anyone is sick, they should call for the elders of the church to pray over them. And then he says the prayer of faith will save the sick and we should pray for one another so that we may be healed.

Simple as that. Pray for yourself. Have the elders pray over you. Pray for one another. You'll be healed. Case closed, right?

But I also remember at a different church when many of us -- elders of the church, plus several others -- gathered around a young woman, Jen. Jen was about my age and she had aggressive breast cancer. We laid hands on her and prayed fervently over her, and yet we gathered together again not long after that for her funeral.

So, how am I to understand James? Were the elders at one church better at praying than the elders at the other church? Did they have more faith? Did one person being prayed for have more faith than the other?

I'll tell you the truth -- as Chuck and I divided up preaching responsibilities, I was *not* thrilled when I saw the passage I was to preach from today. This whole prayer business is a challenging issue for me. Just like the rest of you, I imagine, I have had times when I've prayed for one who was sick and that person got better and times when I've prayed for one who was sick and that person *didn't* get better.

How does prayer work? Are we doing it wrong when someone does not recover from illness? Are we doing it *right* when another one *does* recover?

Some of you have probably read the *Mitford* series of novels about an Episcopal priest named Father Tim. In those books, there are repeated references made to "the prayer that never fails." What prayer is that? It is "Thy will be done." In all of the situations of our lives and the lives of our loved ones, our prayers should include that phrase: "*thy will be done.*" Jesus gave us that phrase in what we call the Lord's Prayer that we pray here every week, and he even modeled it for us when praying in the garden before his death. He prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." In that brief line, Jesus says it twice: "if you are willing" and "not my will but yours." Jesus -- the very son of God -- knew that what mattered most in the situation was the will of God.

God's will is at work in each situation of all of our lives. We pray, making our requests to God, but we must also understand that our thoughts are not God's thoughts, nor are our ways God's ways (Isaiah 55:8). We pray, knowing that God is *able* to meet our request, but for reasons that are far beyond our ability to understand, sometimes those requests do not match up with God's will in the situation. We pray with confidence that the Great Physician can bring about healing and restoration, but we recognize that such will not always come to fruition. We know that through it all, though we can't always see it, all things work together for good for those who love God (Romans 8:28).

And, in the end, perhaps praying is not really about telling God what it is that we want or need. I went to a conference once where noted speaker Tony Campolo spoke a bit about prayer. He said we usually pray all wrong. We'll say, "God, Sister Mary is in the hospital." And God responds, "*Really?!?! Which hospital?*" It's like we expect God to get out a pen and write down the room number. No, God knows exactly what is going on already. God knows what we want and what we need. Praying is not so much about telling God what is going on in our lives as it is about *communing with God*. It is about focus on God and God's plans

for the world so that our will gradually becomes more and more in tune with God's will. That takes time. We are to be persistent in prayer because that is the only way that our will can become attuned to God's will. We are to be persistent because opening our hearts to God and listening to God's heart is something that takes much practice.

I went to the movie theater one day this past week at 10 in the morning. There are not a lot of people at the theater at that time of day. I went into an almost empty movie theater, where about 8 other people and I watched the movie "War Room." If you don't know about this movie, it is a film about the power of prayer. I have mentioned a few movies here with the caveat that I was *not* suggesting that you go watch those particular movies -- even though some of you have later told me that you *did* watch them, anyway. This movie is different, and I *am* suggesting you go watch it. I believe that pretty much everyone here could benefit from watching "War Room." Its title comes from the suggestion of wise elder Miss Clara, who suggests that the lead character establish a "war room" -- a room with no distractions where she can devote herself to prayer for her family. Miss Clara says to develop a "Battle Plan" for your time of prayer. I won't give away the plot of the movie, but I do think we should follow Miss Clara's advice when she says we should "plead with God for what only He can do, and then get out of the way and let Him do it." James says "the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." *The Message* paraphrase puts it this way: "The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with." This film suggests that we need to be more disciplined and proactive in our prayer life, and I would guess that is true for most of us here. One of the things that really impressed me about the character Miss Clara is that she had a wall in her house that she called her "Wall of Remembrance." This wall was covered with photos of loved ones and right in the center was a large frame with the heading "Answered Prayers" and blanks for writing them down. What a wonderful way to draw our focus back to the ways that God *has indeed* answered prayers. If you are like me, your mind wanders all too often to the prayers that *haven't* been answered the way you wanted. Sometimes it's difficult to keep in mind the prayers that *have* been answered in our lives. Maybe a Wall of Remembrance is a good idea for some of us.

As I mentioned, there were about 8 people in this movie theater which could seat hundreds. That made it easy to hear one particular woman, who had roughly the appearance of Miss Clara -- an older, African-American woman. Throughout the movie, she called out "Amen" and "Hallelujahs." After the movie ended, she left the theater still shouting "Hallelujah." It seemed that I was in the presence of one who knew how to take her supplication to God and then leave it at the feet of the Almighty, trusting that God would work out God's divine will in the situation.

In this short passage from James, the word "prayer" is used five times. It is clear that Christians are to be people of prayer. We are called to persist in prayer. In other places in scripture, we are told to pray without ceasing. And this church certainly has many people of prayer. One prayer team meets weekly. One meets monthly. Other prayer requests are sent out by email weekly. Our Saturday evening service is known as a "Praise and Prayer Gathering," and large portions of that service are devoted to prayer. A member of the

prayer ministry meets with the pastors every Sunday morning to pray before the services. We pray in our worship services, in staff meetings, in session meetings, in committee meetings, in hospital rooms, and Pastor Chuck has recently instituted a time of prayer with the staff each morning in his office. There is much prayer going on here, but there can always be *more* prayer here, and I imagine there is room for more prayer in most of our lives, as well.

We must also note that James calls us to pray in community. James teaches us to call upon the elders to pray over us. He also says we should confess our sins to one another, and pray for one another. We should sing songs of praise. These are not acts done alone. The “War Room” method for prayer is drawn from Matthew 6, where Jesus advocates going into your room and shutting the door to pray. While we need that type of prayer at home, James is *additionally* calling us to a communal type of prayer. This communal aspect shows us that members of the community bear responsibility for each other. We need to come together to sing when we are cheerful *and* we need to come together and pray when we are suffering. We need to lift each other up in prayer and praise to our God.

And, in the end, will all of our prayers be answered in the way that we wanted them to be answered? No, that’s just not the way of God, and for pretty good reason. Imagine what the world would look like if each person had all of their prayers answered in just the way they wanted. Sounds great to a seven-year-old, but as we mature we can see why that would be a problem. So, we approach God in prayer throughout our days, presenting our requests to God, knowing that, as I said a few weeks ago, “God is God and I am not.”

Robert Rakestraw, a professor of theology at Bethel Theological Seminary, writes:

Our God is a faithful and merciful God. We can trust him to do what is best for us, whether that means total healing, partial healing, continuing as we have been, further deterioration of our condition, or going home to glory. Our Great Physician still stands with arms wide open, gently urging: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).¹

Let us continue to bring our prayers before the Almighty, trusting each situation to God’s gracious care. Amen.

¹ “When Suffering Continues,” The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. 2003. Page 34.