

Summer of Prayer

“Praying for One Another”

James 5:13-16

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This summer we are experiencing a *Summer of Prayer* here at Columbia, an opportunity to look in some depth at the practice of prayer, which is mysterious and – as the reader board up on St Helen’s Street suggests – work, it’s not easy to develop a meaningful life of prayer. It sounds very simple – prayer is talking to God, right? Well, how about listening? What do we say when we talk to God? And then there’s that interesting and very challenging command given by the Apostle Paul to the early church, *“Pray without ceasing”* (I Thess. 5:17). What does that mean? So, there is more to prayer than we may at first think.

The Bible, of course, has a lot to say about prayer. From Genesis to Revelation the scripture reveals that our Jewish and Christian forebears prayed: Abraham and Sarah, Moses, David, Mary, Peter, Paul, etc. There is a prayer book in the Bible – and it’s one of the longest books, the Book of Psalms. In our scripture reading this morning James, the brother (half brother) of Jesus gives to his readers, who are thought by most New Testament scholars to be Jewish Christians, that is, Jews who became followers of Jesus, the challenge, *“pray for one another”* (5:16). How do we pray for each other? How do we pray? James suggests three things about prayer: pray in all **circumstances**, pray in **community**, and pray in **confidence** (or conviction). Let’s look at these.

First, pray in all **circumstances**. Notice how James begins in verse 13, *“Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise”* (*“songs of praise”* is part of the prayer vocabulary of the Bible). Don’t we live our lives between these two poles? There are times in all of our lives when we suffer. Sometimes the suffering is the result of our own bad decisions, sometimes it’s because of circumstances beyond our control. All of us face challenges, and when they occur, when we are suffering, we should pray. When others are suffering, we should pray for them.

There are also times in all our lives when we are “cheerful”, or other translations use the word “happy”, that is, when life is working well. It’s an interesting word that Jesus uses (*euthymeo*), a word that suggests something far more than a superficial happiness dependent on circumstances. It refers to a deep rooted joy, a contentment of the heart even when conditions are difficult. When this is our experience in life, according to James, we are to “sing songs of praise”, in other words, offer our thanks to God in prayer. Life is a mixture of these two – suffering or hardship or challenge, AND joy or contentment or peace. We all live somewhere between these two extremes. In all circumstances pray.

Second, James tells us to pray in community (i.e. with others), to be aware, even when we pray silently and privately that we are part of a “community of pray-ers”. Did you notice how many of the pronouns in this passage are plural (i.e. “they, they, them, them”)? And listen again to verse 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.” James assumes that the believers to whom he is writing have a ministry of corporate or community prayer – it’s a given. He assumes that leaders in the church will respond to the needs of others by offering prayer, specifically healing prayer.

Do you know that we have such a ministry at CPC? There has been a Prayer Chain for a number of years. Now, prayer chains can be a little tricky, I have observed in a number of churches – other churches – that prayer chains can become “information chains”, or may I say “gossip chains”? But having a vital prayer ministry is essential for the spiritual life of the church, and prayer chains and prayer groups are a must. I am profoundly grateful for the several groups around Columbia that meet regularly for prayer. The leaders of this congregation – deacons, elders and staff – are people of prayer.

We are in the process of changing our prayer chain to an “e-prayer” system. It’s not done yet, it’s still in process, we’re working out guidelines, but already there are over 30 people who are signed up (and you can join them - check out the Pilot Light in your mail box, email or on-line this week).

James writes, “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders” or deacons or pastors. Every pastor, and perhaps every church leader (deacon or elder), has heard these words, “I was in the hospital and no one from the church visited”, or “I have been sick at home for a long time and no one offered

to help". I hate when this happens –and it does – but the truth is: in most situations, we didn't know! There are lots of people in this congregation who take prayer very seriously and want to pray for others, but they must be informed, "*called upon*" in the words of James. It can be hard to ask for prayer, but this text tells us to do it.

Let me take a minute to say a few words about this issue of healing prayer. James says that the elders (deacons, pastors, prayer team) should pray for the sick "*anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick . . .*" This makes some of us a little nervous, especially when there has been abuse of healing prayer. James is not saying only prayer and no medicine; he is talking about prayer and medicine. Anointing with oil in the 1st century was a medicinal act, and a spiritual act. Anointing with oil was – and is – a sign of the Holy Spirit's work, but its primary purpose was medicinal. So, prayer doesn't replace medicine, it supplements it.

Finally, James encourages us to pray in confidence or conviction. In verse 16, James writes, "*The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.*" Prayer makes a difference! God does hear and answer prayer! The answer is not always what we want – God answers prayer in a way that brings honor to him. Sometimes prayer changes things, but prayer also changes us, prayer is powerful and effective! My friend Bob Sanders used the following image in a recent sermon on prayer ("*Where We Pray for One Another*", 6/27/10): "*Think of prayer as the extension cord that connects the transforming power of God to the people and places where there's sickness, brokenness, injustice, grief and pain. We give God the chance to reach them, to save them, to heal and bless them. It's the greatest thing we can do for another human being: connect them to the power of God.*"

Prayer unlocks the reservoir of God's amazing grace. Sometimes I hear the comment, "*I wish there is something I could do, I can only pray.*" ONLY PRAY, as if prayer is an inadequate response! So, friends, let us commit ourselves to the practice of praying for one another – in all circumstances, in community and in confidence. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit – Amen.