

FIRST LESSON: 1 Kings 17: 1; 7-16
SECOND LESSON: James 5:13-20
September 26, 2021

“Pray and Trust”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

I apologize if you’ve heard this before, but it’s one of my favorites. Three pastors sat discussing the best positions for prayer while a telephone repairman worked nearby. “Kneeling is definitely best,” claimed the Episcopalian priest.

“No,” said the Pentecostal pastor. “I get the best results standing with my hands outstretched to Heaven.”

“You’re both wrong,” the Holiness Church pastor declared. “The most effective prayer position is lying prostrate, face down on the floor.”

The repairman couldn’t contain himself any longer. “Hey, fellas,” he yelled over, “the best prayin’ I ever did was hangin’ upside down from a telephone pole.”

Elijah prayed that it would not rain and it did not rain. With climate change we are experiencing droughts and floods more than ever. We don’t attribute them to prayer. In fact, we pray that they would stop. There are natural disasters made worse by our actions and natural disasters that just happen. No one can prevent a volcano from erupting. But nature has always been a fearsome thing, and humans have always sought God for help in time of need. We even pray for nice weather for special events! Somehow, I suspect that those kind of prayers are not high on God’s priority list. When WE pray about anything, however, normally we are asking for circumstances around us to change. But sometimes what needs to change is us. God does not always change the crisis, but God does give us wisdom, endurance, strength and patience in the crisis, and God does provide support directly and through other people.

James begins, “Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.” Those “in trouble” are suffering from any kind of trial or difficulty. They could be in a financial crisis. They could be seriously ill. They could be depressed or have other problems. This describes any kind of really tough time. The answer in these times is to pray. On the opposite end are those who are happy. These are the people who are more than just in a good mood. They feel whole in themselves and positive about life. This kind of happiness runs deep, and the response should be to

sing songs of praise. In good times and bad, ups and downs, we are to involve God at the center of our lives.

James then moves on to the physical realm, saying, “Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up.” Physical illness is what James is referring to here, but interestingly this time he DOESN’T just say, pray. This time he says call the community. The elders are the spiritual leaders of the community, but if there are no elders around anyone can pray for healing. We have had healing services in the past where we anoint people with oil. Traditionally Presbyterians don’t do things like this, for no other reason than they are Presbyterian. But prayers for healing should happen all the time, and if a person is ill, they need the prayers of others.

On the surface of things, this passage does look like every prayer for a sick person will make them well. But there is a double meaning in this verse that we don’t pick up on because of the way it is translated. It does not actually say that the sick will be made well. It says that the sick will be **saved**. This can mean physically healed, but it can equally mean spiritually healed. And this reality becomes clearer in the next phrases. We are told that the “Lord will raise them up.” This is the same word used to refer to the resurrection. And James continues, “If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”

The relationship between sin and sickness is complex. There are always people who believe that when something bad happens to them they are being punished for sin. Much of this stems from the very primal experience of early childhood. We do something bad. We get caught. And we get punished. Being naughty equals a bad thing happening. And certainly, there are natural consequences we experience as an adult. Those who commit crimes are not going to face pleasant repercussions if they are caught. Abusing our bodies with drugs, alcohol or tobacco will have a direct impact on our health. Lying and cheating destroys relationships. But just because we get sick, does not mean that we have done something wrong and are being punished for it. One of the reasons the book of Job was included in scripture was to make this point. Job’s friends thought that he must have done something wrong. Job was adamant that he had not, and he was vindicated in the end. There are some sins that can make us sick because the mind and the body are one, but it’s not a punishment. It’s a consequence. Guilt can weigh heavily on a person. Fear and anxiety cause high levels of stress hormones to race through our veins and damage organs. Bitterness can age us. Those who treat cancer patients know that prognosis and state of mind are closely connected. Because of this, forgiveness is profoundly healing. To confess our faults, let go of them and be forgiven opens us up to God’s grace. We can choose grudges and hate. Or we can choose humility, grace and life.

Today is World Communion Sunday, and it is therefore also very appropriate for us to acknowledge that there are some sins that can make the world of nations and the planet itself sick, because our lives are intertwined with one another whether we want to acknowledge this or not, and what we do

has an impact. As we celebrate our oneness with Christians around the world, we also need to remember our responsibility to care for everyone around the world. God is not punishing people when floods and droughts and cataclysmic fires happen because of climate change. But the sins of greed, willful disregard for life and exploitation have natural consequences. We need to help people when they are suffering and we need to work to end that suffering by demanding change. We might think that politicians have all the power, but many times it is multi-national corporations who are really calling the shots. They are the ones who give campaign money to those who will do their bidding. We have power in the ballot box, **but we forget that we also have power in the pocketbook.** What we buy, who we buy from, and what we avoid has consequences. If I buy Chinese goods made by enslaved Uyghurs in China, am I not supporting a regime that is systematically imprisoning, torturing and killing them? Shell has had numerous deadly oil spills in Nigeria and its agents are not above using the most heinous methods to get what they want. Should I buy gas from Shell? Gap uses child labor and claims that it can't do anything about it. Their workers live in appalling poverty in third world nations. These people are our sisters and brothers. Should we ignore this? Just a little bit of research can be very uncomfortable and eye-opening. And these things are not hard to find out. The information is out there. We can boycott corporations who choose exploitation in order to make larger profits, and we can let people know we are doing so. There is real concrete cause and effect to our actions. The Presbyterian Church USA even has guidance readily available online on socially responsible investing.

And so we come back to Elijah who was a human being, even as we are. He “prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.” Action is powerful. Prayer is also powerful. The book of James says that both are essential. When our actions are immersed in prayer lives change. People forget that. They say, “Well we’ll just have to pray,” as if prayer were a last resort and a futile effort. But when we pray and deliberately entrust God with our concerns, God works. God may not always work in the way we want, but God does work. We pray and we trust God for the answer, because while there will always be times in our lives when we cannot see the whole picture and we do not know what is ahead, God is already there. Amen.

Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.”

⁷ Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. ⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to him: ⁹ “Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food.” ¹⁰ So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, “Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?” ¹¹ As she was going to get it, he called, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.”

¹² “As surely as the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”

¹³ Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴ For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: “The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.””

¹⁵ She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. ¹⁶ For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.

James 5:13-20

¹³ Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

¹⁷ Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸ Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

¹⁹ My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.