

The Faith of Prayer

James 5:13-20; Luke 18:9-14

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Are any among you suffering?

This is how our first reading from James begins this morning. The book of James is a letter written to a church at a specific time and place in history. Real people going through real things in their real lives.

So, I thought our church at our specific time and place in history. I thought about what I know to be true about your lives, right now.

Are any among you suffering? I know that the answer is, “yes.”

Some of you are you are suffering physically, living with illnesses and conditions and diagnoses that render the future uncertain.

Some of you are suffering the distress of watching people dear to you suffer.

Some of you are suffering with grief over the death of a loved one.

Some of you are suffering the agony of watching your children go through hard things that you feel powerless to fix.

Some of you are suffering financial hardship.

Some of you are suffering the pain of an important relationship that is strained.

Some of you are suffering through crises of identity and vocation and possibly even faith.

And, of course, it's 2021 and we're living through a pandemic. So, I know many of us are suffering things like loneliness, confusion, depression, anxiety, anger, fear.

Hope may seem hard to come by these days, and the loss of hope is its own kind of suffering.

Now, I know that the word “suffering” means different things to different people. There are some who would look at the list above and say, “That’s not suffering. Suffering is starvation and poverty and war and famine and persecution and oppression and... You’re just describing the normal bad stuff that happens in our world.”

Perhaps. But it’s a risky business ranking suffering. I’ve learned at least this much over thirteen years of being a pastor. No matter how I might evaluate someone’s plight, if it hurts, it’s real.

So, in response to the question from James that I began with: “Are any among you suffering?”...

... we might be forgiven for thinking, “Well seriously, James! Are any among us *not* suffering?”

So, what to do.

Well, in about twenty minutes we’re going to have a prayer time. So, I’ll just pray, and it will all be good. Right?

James says that “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective,” doesn’t he? I’m not *totally* righteous, but I’m maybe 60% righteous... or 50%... or 40%... Righteous enough to at least make a *bit* of a dent in all this suffering, right?

It sounds pretty straightforward. If you are righteous and if you pray, then you (or the one you are praying for) will be healed.” End of story.

If *x*, then *y*.

Many people have interpreted this passage from James this way. Many people still interpret this passage in this way.

But what happens when, inevitably, someone is not healed? What happens when the suffering doesn’t stop?

What then? Did we not have enough faith? Did we not pray hard enough? Was there unconfessed sin in someone’s life? Was the pray-er not righteous or not righteous enough?

Did we do it wrong? Did we not get all the variables just right?

Or are there better ways of interpreting James's words?

The broad narrative of Scripture is quite clear that a relationship with God, a life of faith, and the practice of prayer cannot be reduced to a formula.

The God of the Bible is not a genie in a bottle who, if the bottle is rubbed correctly, will magically appear, duty-bound to grant our wishes.

The God of the Bible is radically free. God is not constrained by some external principle to respond to human behaviour.

Yahweh revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush: "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be" (Exodus 3:14).

In other words, I am not necessarily who you think I am, nor will I always act as you think I should act. I am not predictable like a formula, and I cannot be controlled by human efforts.

The God of the Bible seeks not manipulation but covenantal relationship.

A relationship, by definition, is not a formula but, at its best, a process of learning, discovery, and the deepening and expanding of love and trust.

James knew this very well. James knew that God was not a variable in a formula.

We need only look at the paragraph preceding our text this morning to see this. I won't read it, but in my bible, the heading above James 5:7-12 is "Patience in suffering."

It makes very little sense for James to encourage patience and perseverance in the face of suffering if in the *very next* paragraph he thinks that the correct kind of prayer will always and inevitably eliminate suffering.

James is a book about behaviour not doctrine. It is fundamentally practical, focusing more on what Christians are to *do* than what they are supposed to *think*. The two cannot be separated, obviously, but James clearly emphasizes the "doing" part.

In context, this passage probably isn't concerned with pronouncing once and for all about the *efficiency* of prayer; it is, rather, simply a call to pray.

Are you sick? Then pray. Full stop.

And when the answer that you expect or hope for doesn't come? Keep praying, keep going, keep trusting.

Like the persistent widow Jesus refers to in Luke 18, who refuses to stop pleading for justice even when it seems slow in coming.

Like Job, who kept pouring out his grief to God despite suffering horribly and having no idea why.

Like the heroes of faith in the book of Hebrews 11 who "did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance."

The life of faith is always one in which we only see in part, only know in part, only receive in part.

We don't know why some are healed and some are not, why some are delivered from calamity, and some must walk through it.

We are simply called to follow the Way, the Truth, and the Life, confident that Jesus knows more and better than we do, and that he can be trusted.

Even when we don't understand, even when our prayers seem to echo out into the void.

Tish Harrison Warren is an Episcopal priest who has written a book called *Prayer in the Night*. It's about praying when things are hard. Here's what she writes about what prayer was for her during one particularly dark time:

Through prayer I dared to believe that God was in the midst of my chaos and pain, whatever was to come. I was reaching for a reality that was larger and more enduring than what I felt in the moment.

I love that last line. *I was reaching for a reality that was larger and more enduring than what I felt in the moment.*

For the Christian, this larger and more enduring reality is one in which we know that suffering is part of the story but never the last part.

Christ's suffering lends meaning and dignity to all human suffering. Christ's resurrection offers a hope that goes beyond it.

I included a story from Luke this morning alongside our passage from James. I did this because I think that it's important to hear the bible in conversation with itself.

If we're confused about what James has to say about how prayer works and why human suffering seems so persistent, if our heads hurt trying to put it all together, if we struggle to pray or know why we should even bother, why not see what Jesus has to say about things?

Jesus points to two men who went up to the temple to pray. One is a Pharisee, a teacher of the law who presumably knew all the prayers and the theology behind them. The other is a tax-collector, a despised collaborator with the Roman occupiers.

The Pharisee's prayer is a (loud) recitation of his own merits, his own worthiness. He checks off all that he does that ought to score him points in God's books. He is spiritually disciplined, morally scrupulous, generous.

This prayer is more performance than petition.

The tax-collector, on the other hand, cannot even lift his head. He beats his breast in anguish and simply cries out for mercy, knowing full well that he is a sinner in need of grace.

This prayer is a desperate plea and little more. There is no pretense, no illusions that his merits could compel God to act. The tax-collector simply throws himself upon the mercy of God.

And it is the tax collector's prayer that Jesus honours. It is the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who goes home justified—"vindicated as truly righteous," as one commentator put it.

I thought of the tax collector when I read an article this week called "When Prayers Become Gibberish." The author's name is Cali Yee and here's what she says:

Prayer is not something to check off our list. Nor is it a requirement, a chore that we have to complete... It is a way we can be held by God, when we are too tired to hold ourselves up. And when we are at our lowest, when we feel completely unworthy and broken, we need prayer to be what it actually is: a cry for help. A plea for God to rescue us from our helplessness and save us from our despair.

And in those moments – when words are hard to find, when all we can do is weep – God hears us. He hears our wails and groans, especially the ones where we sound like a

blubbing mess. He understands the unspoken prayers of our hearts that we didn't even know were there.

We don't need a dictionary to give us the words. We don't need to be able to form coherent sentences. All we can do is fall [into] the capable hands of a God who understands our silence and our gibberish. For the One who created us knows our needs better than we could ever express.¹

I think it takes more faith to pray like the tax collector than it does to pray like the Pharisee.

I think that as human beings we instinctively focus on the “the prayer of faith” in James. We want to know what the best and most effective form of prayer is. We want to know what kind of prayer “works.”

“The prayer of faith” can easily become more about us than about God. And we too easily find ourselves like the Pharisee, piling up the impressive-sounding words, focusing mostly on ourselves and our worthiness, hoping that this might get us the desired result.

The tax collector in Jesus' story retrains our vision on “the faith of prayer.” It is a prayer that simply hurls itself in desperation toward our only hope.

The “faith of prayer” acknowledges that God is God, and we are not, and that ultimately our deepest need can only be met for God.

We pray for the things that we want and need. Health, direction, guidance, healing. To fix that which is broken in our lives. These things are not small things, and they are very natural things to pray for.

But our deepest need is for what the tax collector prays for and is given. Mercy. Forgiveness. Justification before God. Healing of the deepest and most lasting kind.

This, incidentally, is also what James says. Did you notice how seamlessly James went back and forth between sin and sickness?

“The prayer of faith will save the sick and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven,” he says (James 5:15).

“Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed,” he says (James 5:16).

¹ <https://mbird.com/religion/prayer/when-prayers-become-gibberish/>

For James, spiritual healing and physical healing are all part of the same package.

The faith that we exercise in prayer is one of the ways in which we “reach for a reality that is larger and more enduring than what we feel in the moment,” to borrow the language of Tish Harrison Warren again.

In this world we will have trouble. Jesus knew this and Jesus told us this. But he also told us to take heart because he has overcome the world.

This is the reality that all of our desperate praying and longing stretches out toward in hope.

I want to end with a word about joy. James doesn't *just* talk about suffering even if I have sort of implied that he does.

Let's go back to the beginning of our reading. James 5:13: “Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.”

Are any among you cheerful? I hope so.

On Friday afternoon I had hit a bit of a wall with this sermon. I decided to go for a walk around Henderson Lake.

It was an absolutely spectacular autumn day. Twenty-four degrees, brilliant sunshine, not a breath of wind.

The leaves on the trees are a glorious mixture of oranges and yellows and reds and greens at this time of year. The water was clear and clean and looked like a mirror. The sun was beginning to make its gradual descent over the horizon.

At one point, I looked out and saw shafts of light beaming through the trees up ahead. The lake was in the foreground. There were sun-kissed leaves falling from the trees. The angle of the sunlight reflecting off the water and the shadows combined to make the leaves look like diamonds falling from the sky.

It was breathtaking. It was like a visual parable of the goodness and beauty and creative power of God.

And I was reminded of a simple truth that I suspect we don't focus on nearly as much as we should.

It is not just the suffering of the world that requires explanation and our attention. It's not just the hard things in our lives and our world that ought to lead us to cry out to God in prayer.

Moments of beauty and gladness and cheer ought also to call forth our praise. These things should also cause us to "reach out for a reality that is larger and more enduring than what we feel in the moment."

In the moment, I *did* feel cheerful. I didn't sing a song of praise (sorry, James. I just said, simply, "Thank you, God for this moment." And thank you that this moment with all the beauty it contains points beyond itself to something that will forever endure.

And so, whether we are suffering or cheerful, whether we are walking through hard times or good ones, may God help us to exercise the faith of prayer.

May God help us to cry out in desperation and humility for all that we need. And may God help us to sing with joy for his many good gifts.

Amen.

