

The Power of Prayer

James 5:13-20

September 30, 2018 – Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Friends, today we conclude our five week series on the Epistle of James, and what more fitting way to conclude our study of the letter than by discussing the power of prayer. James says, “If any of you are suffering, they should pray. If any of you are happy, they should sing. If any of you are sick, they should call for the elders of the church, and the elders should pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. Prayer that comes from faith will heal the sick, for the Lord will restore them to health.” Wow!!! What do we do with that?

I need to start by saying that we’re “walking on some thin ice.” Most clergy can cite an experience where someone was extremely ill, and a friend or a spouse or even an entire congregation prayer endlessly, and the person still died. Most clergy can quote at least one and maybe several situations where a parishioner was extremely angry with God because, in their view, “God chose not to answer their prayers.”

How often have we heard the statement, “We’re praying for a miracle,” and I need to tell you that miracles do happen. I know of one such case. My sister’s brother-in-law was diagnosed with a brain tumor, confirmed with an MRI; and he was scheduled for surgery. The morning of the surgery, the surgeon ordered another MRI to see exactly what he was dealing with; and to everyone’s surprise, the tumor was gone – not a trace. And to this day, medical science has not been able to explain the phenomena. Years later, when my sister was in the last days of her life, her body ravaged with cancer, her brother-in-law took up station at her bedside to pray night and day for her healing. My sister still died.

Friends, I need to say that I am a child of the enlightenment. While there are certainly miracles that seem to occur, things that modern science cannot explain, I do believe in an orderly universe, and that includes the orderly cycles of life and illness and eventually death. That being said, I also believe in the power of prayer, the power of God, the power of the Holy Spirit.

Scientific studies on the positive effects of prayer are not widely publicized. Somehow, it seems sacrilegious to conduct scientific experiments on the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, there are ethical questions around such studies; for, if we’re going to study the effects of prayer, we need an experimental group – a group that we will pray for; and a control group – a group that we will not pray for. Thus the question: Is it ethical to pray for some people and not for others?

Still, such studies have been conducted on random groups of hospitalized patients. And studies have consistently proven that people who are prayed for do better, feel better, have less pain, and recover faster than people who are not prayed

for. And this is true, even if the people *do not know* they are being prayed for. However, they do *still better* if they are aware that people are praying for them. Indeed, prayer has a positive impact on health, not just mental and emotional health but also physical health. Friends, I can't explain why this is true; but then I can't explain the power of the Holy Spirit. I once had a theology professor who stated that, to claim a theological belief is a mystery is "a copout." While, I understand where my professor was coming from, I also know that many of the workings of the Holy Spirit are indeed a mystery; and I'm not sure I'd want it any other way.

By now, most of you are probably tired of hearing about the Daniel Plan; and I will honestly try to limit my mention of it after today. But, one of the key strengths of the Daniel Plan over other wellness programs is its faith component. Indeed, the first essential of the Daniel Plan is Faith. The plan is prayer based. We call on our faith in God and the power of the Holy Spirit to lead us into a healthy life. The fourth element of the Daniel Plan is Focus; and prayer is a part of that focus – keeping centered on our relationship with God; keeping centered on God's plan for our life.

But the second essential of the Daniel Plan is Food; and the third is Fitness, the physical, down-to-earth elements. We cannot pray our pounds away. We cannot pray a healthier diet – low in sugar, starch and simple carbs; and we cannot pray for a stronger heart and lungs and a fitter body. We can and do pray that God will support us and lead us in the decisions and the plans we will make. But facts are facts: The only way to a healthier life is be eating healthy and maintaining a reasonable exercise plan.

As I was writing this, my thoughts were that prayer alone doesn't do it; but we can't do it without prayer. You see, here we are again – finding balance in our lives: balancing the physical with the spiritual with the emotional. If any one of these things gets out of balance our health suffers.

This brings me to the final element of the Daniel Plan: Friends. I stated that one of the strengths of the plan is that it is faith based. The other strength is that it is group supported. There is no question: when it comes to matters spiritual, the sum is greater than to total of the parts.

Sometimes, rarely but sometimes, someone will complain about the length of our service. It's been said that the service should never go over an hour – 70 minutes at the max; and I do try to be mindful of the service length. At the same time, frequently the longest single element of our service is our prayer time. Frequently, a dozen people or more will raise joys and concerns during this time; and some people will raise two or three; but, isn't that what the church is about.

In good Protestant tradition, this, the message, is generally seen as the central part of worship. Our scriptures are chosen as the foundation of the

message; and our hymns are chosen to support the message. If we were Catholic, the message would play a less significant role, as the Sacrament of Holy Communion is seen as the central element of worship. And don't hear any criticism of that on my part – I absolutely love the sacrament.

Still, I ask myself if just maybe both traditions have it wrong. Maybe it's actually my Quaker friends who have it right – the most important thing the church does is come together as the body of Christ in prayer. Now, I'm not going to turn Quaker. The Quakers don't celebrate the sacraments. They believe the reflection should be inward not outward. I believe it should be both inward and outward. Quakers do meditate on scripture, but it grows out of prayer. A few weeks back, we heard James say, "Faith without works is dead." If I can interpolate just a bit on today's scripture, I tell you "Life without prayer is dead."

And so, James calls us to pray. I've said it before, but I believe it bears repeating... Prayer is a two-way conversation. All too often, our prayers become a one-way wish list. We pray, "Dear God, please do. . . (*and we follow with a list*). Dear God, please heal. . . (*and we follow with a list*). Dear God, please give me. . . (*and we follow with a list*)." Then we quickly say "Amen," and we go on with life – business as usual. And so I again encourage you to take time. Take time to sit quietly and listen. . . Listen to God. Listen for God's call on your life. Listen to discern where God is calling you. Just as we are called to listen to others, we are all the more called to listen to God.

And, of course, following the listening, it is time to pray for the strength, the courage, and the faith to follow where God is leading. That's what prayer is all about; and it's only through prayer that we grow into an ever closer relationship with the living God.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord, Jesus,
your disciples asked you to teach them to pray.
Today we likewise ask, "Teach us to pray."
Teach us to listen, that we may discern your will.
Then give us the strength, the courage, and the faith
to follow where you lead.
Amen.

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