

Text: James 5: 13-20  
Title: A Prayer Imperative  
Date: 09.30.18  
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A dear friend called on Friday morning.

She was our kids first and favorite baby sitter. She fell in love with Chicago on a mission trip I led to Roseland Christian Ministries Center. She's now a counselor at a Chicago public high school. She's the wonderful mother of three delightful young boys. She called on Friday morning to tell me that she's been diagnosed with an aggressive lymphatic cancer.

I could immediately hear in her voice: the gravity, the fear, the uncertainty, the incredulity, the anger, the weight. She talked about starting chemo and the friends and family that were rallying around her. She wept about her boys. She talked about needing cutting-edge treatments. She wept about her boys. She called me because, in her words, she needed someone who was "connected to God....."

Of course, she was joking. She called because we've been friends for 30 years. But, she's gutted and desperate and would do anything to beat down the doors of heaven that God would be merciful and bring healing. At one point she said people were praying for her but she needed "all of science to show up."

A dear friend called on Friday morning as this text lay open in front of me.

*Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray...  
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 them well; the Lord will raise them up.*

James is direct and dogmatic, there's little nuance, there are few shades of gray and little room for wiggle or ambiguity.

If you're sick ~ pray.  
If you're in trouble ~ pray.  
If you're happy ~ pray.  
If you've sinned ~ pray.  
If you need healing ~ pray.  
If you storm the gates, if you rattle the door, if thunder or if you whimper, if you just keep praying one day God will heal, raise, and forgive.

Oh, that it were that clear, that stark, that simple....  
But, it is hard to ignore the empirical evidence.

We may know marvelous stories of answered prayer and miraculous healing, but we also know stories of prayers that didn't bring health. We know stories of faithful people bent in humble petition who never find wholeness. We know

stories of people earnestly praying for restoration only to continue in brokenness. We know our own stories and struggles with prayer.

And yet, the sweeping statements of James are clear, culminating in the assertion that the “prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” In fact, James says that righteous people get their prayers answered. So, if your prayers aren’t effective or don’t get answered..... Well, you do the math.

And then, as if that weren’t enough, James dangles Elijah in front of us. “He was just like us,” he prayed and God answered him. Elijah prayed every day for three and half years and it didn’t rain. Then he prayed one more day and the skies were wrenched open and the rains fell. So, be like Elijah; he’s just like us.

Dear friends, it’s hard to cotton to James.

In part, because the Epistle of James has only 108 verses, but 56% (or 60 out of 108) are in the imperative voice. They’re commands, instructions, direct orders. There is an emphatic demanding tone to James. There’s a laundry list of practicality: do this, don’t do that. Don’t understand it? Don’t care. Pray.

Now, I am not sure how to put the imperative alongside the empirical. And, in that I am not alone. Martin Luther didn’t cotton to James either and at one point he’s to have said, “It made me so mad I almost threw James into the fire of my woodstove.” And, short of stoking that fire, many biblical scholars have tussled with the language in our text trying to make the references to health and healing as spiritual health and healing, but quite frankly their arguments seem weak. James is not one for nuance....

So, what are we do to with this text?

Is there a helpful word that encourages and draws us forward?

Is there something that holds the imperative and the empirical together?

Try this on for size....

We live with cultural and religious expectations that we can have a “personal relationship” with Jesus, and that relationship will be marked by prayer. As Christ prayed, and taught prayer, and invited us to pray it is hard to frame the journey of faith without some manner of prayer. Prayer is part of following Christ.

And yet, as Kathleen Norris writes:

*Prayer is often stereotyped in our culture as a form of pietism, a lamentable privatization of religion. Even many Christians seem to regard prayer as a grocery list we hand to God, and when we don’t get what we want, we assume that prayers didn’t “work.” This is privatization at its worst, and a cosmic selfishness.*

*Prayer does not “want.” It is ordinary experience lived with gratitude and wonder, a wonder that make us know the smallness of oneself in an enormous and various universe.*

James reminds us that prayer is not just a private affair, but there is a communal nature to prayer. James writes of

going to others,  
praying with others,  
praying for others,  
confessing our sins to others,  
restoring others.

As prayer is an inescapable part of following Christ it is lived out with others. It is an essential part of what shapes and balances our life together.

We pray with each other and for each other.

We pray together for forgiveness and healing.

We are joined in prayers of thanksgiving and we pray for the world. Prayer is an experience of community.

When dear colorful Evelyn Hendrickson suffered a stroke it compromised her ability to speak. She could only form one syllable words: yes and no. In the first hours and days after the stroke we didn't know what to pray.

Do you pray for healing?  
Do you pray for some other mercy?  
Do you pray for God's will?  
What is God's will here?

But, we held her hand and we prayed. Her boys sat around her bed and we prayed. And, when I didn't know what else to say I reminded Evelyn that her church was praying and her eyes lit up with thanksgiving. There was unspoken evidence that the prayers of her church family were sustaining, encouraging, and part of what helped her keep going.

A few weeks later while strapped in a wheelchair, waiting to go to rehab, she indicated that she wanted to know about others who were facing issues of health. She wanted to know about: Gloria Chunis, Fennetta Stoub, Bill Boerman-Cornell, Cathy Larsen, etc. And, her eyes lit up again and from her hospital bed she prayed for them.

Dear friends, I am struck, again and again, by how the supportive web of people praying for one another is powerful, righteous, and effective. I don't think the number of prayers or the number of those praying tips the scales for God. If God needs the prayers of the righteous to act then somehow grace has slipped into meritocracy....

And yet, there is something about a praying community that is more than simply the uniting of minds and spirits. It is the collective recognition that there is more than just the reality that we see. It is the collective faith that God is attentive, active, and not out to lunch. It is the collective expression of longing and even

lament for others. It is the collective confession that finally our healing is the work of God.

As Jamie Smith puts it:

*The practice of prayer banks on God exceeding our worship space, transcending the confines of place and time, and as the Creator of the universe, being interested and concerned about the concrete realities that face us in our finitude.*

This luminous web of prayer is wonderful gift of Hope Church. One of the challenges that we face is how to enfold new folks into that web. How can those who have been nurtured in that web create new space for others?

My best guess is that many of us struggle with prayer.

We whisper a hopeful word before the big test, big race, or just before another sermon. We lay awake and think through our lives in a prayerful spirit, and soon drift off to sleep. We have moments of deepest longing ~ something beyond words. And we go for years without praying. We think of thought as prayer. We remember when it felt like God was listening. We remind ourselves that how we feel isn't what matters; we believe God listens. So....

We write prayers,  
we read prayers,  
we worry about prayers,  
we listen to prayers,  
we wait on prayers,  
we keep lists of prayers,  
we enlist prayer warriors,  
we're prayer weaklings,  
we grow weary of prayer,  
we think of prayer as self-talk,  
we hope our prayers reach beyond the ceiling,  
we pray because it is our last best breath of thanksgiving to God.

James reminds us that in all circumstances there is a prayer imperative.  
No matter what the circumstance there is space for prayer.

A dear friend called on Friday morning.

I told her that no matter the journey God would not abandon her and that ultimately all manner of things would be made well. I told her that I've seen "all of science show up" and buy people more time, more healing, and more hope. And I told her that she wouldn't be alone. Friend and family will show up and we will pray...

So, dear friends, as we live so may we pray. Prayer will take all manner of forms but let us continually turn heart and mind toward God. No matter the circumstances, no matter the outcome, no matter the words or the utter lack of words the invitation of God and the imperative of James is to pray.

As we live, so may we pray.

May we pray with each other and for each other.

May we pray for that which stretches beyond our little web.

May we pray in all circumstances.

For, the prayers of God's people are powerful and effective.

Amen.