



Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 26, 2021

* *Please stand if you are able*

Prelude: "All Things Bright and Beautiful"

Gathering

WELCOME & LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE

Acolyte: May the Holy Spirit unite us in worship, point us toward Jesus Christ, and inspire us to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God. Come, let us worship God.

* CALL TO WORSHIP

Liturgist: The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

All: Day after day they pour forth speech, night after night they display knowledge.

Liturgist: Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

All: In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course.

Psalm 19:1-5 adapted

Liturgist: God of Creation, come near and reveal yourself anew to us in worship and proclamation, in fellowship and prayer.

* **All Singing: 4 "God of Wonders"**
Singing verses 1 and 2 with refrain

* GOD'S GREETING

* GOD'S PEOPLE GREETING ONE ANOTHER

* **All Singing: 581 “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”**

Children ages 2–7 may come forward for a brief word and blessing before they leave for “God Loves Me” and “Children in Worship.”

CHILDREN’S BLESSING

Children: The peace of Christ be with you.

All: And also, with you.

Reconciliation

Liturgist: The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.

All: The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the Lord are sure and all of them righteous.

Liturgist: They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.

All: By them your servants are warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

Liturgist: But who can discern their own errors? Who can keep all your commands?

All: Lord, forgive our hidden faults and keep us from willful sins; may they not rule over us.

Psalm 19:7-13 adapted

Silent Confession and Reflection

All Singing: 903 “O Lord, Hear My Prayer”
Singing verse 1 twice, then verse 2

Liturgist: Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

All: And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

Liturgist: Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance character; and character, hope.

All: And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who was given to us.

Romans 5:1-5

* **All Singing: 17 “Beautiful Savior”**

Proclamation

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

All: May the words of my mouth and the meditation our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Psalm 19:14 adapted

Scripture: James 5:13-20

Minister: The Word of the Lord.
All: Thanks be to God.

Sermon: A Prayer Imperative

* **All Singing: 897 “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”**

Dedication

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

OFFERING

1. General Fund
2. Calvin Seminary

OFFERTORY

Choir: “As the Seeds Are Planted” Chris Juby

As the seeds are planted, let them yield a harvest,
when the crops are gathered: let the earth find rest.

As the workers labor, they deserve their wages,
let them feast with gladness: let the earth find rest.

Let the earth find rest as the Lord provides, till the day of perfect peace;
for the Lord is good and his love endures and his mercies never cease.

When the wealthy prosper, may their hearts be generous,
let them hate injustice: let the earth find rest.

* **All Singing: 965 “Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow”**

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Sending

BENEDICTION

* **All Singing: 943 “God Be with You Till We Meet Again”**

Postlude: “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying” Arr. Jack Schrader

Worship Leaders

Organist / Pianist:	Dora Diephouse	Acolyte:	Grace Batkiewicz
Pianist / Vocalist:	Erin Pacheco	Liturgist:	Mary McKinstry
Vocalist:	Lori Evenhouse	Prayer:	Michael Vander Weele
Guitarist:	Clay Carlson		
Violinist:	Bethany Keeley-Jonker		
Minister:	Roger Nelson		

Hymns are from *Lift Up Your Hearts* (Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013)
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Text: James 5:13-20
Title: A Prayer Imperative
Date: 09.26.21
Roger Allen Nelson

Lately, pretty much everyone tells me that they're praying for me.

I don't think it's simply social nicety; I think it's genuine. And while the practice varies, the impulse is honest. I've had Catholics lighting candles, Greek Orthodox friends anointing with oil, and Protestant families praying around the dinner table. I heard from a neighbor that she's "claiming my healing in the Spirit," and the "spiritual but not religious" report "sending good vibes into the universe." I've been told of strangers that are praying for me and friends contacted me by call, card, and text to tell me that they're praying for me. A good number of you prayed for me. Thank you.

I've been overwhelmed by the love and concern. My spirit is buoyed that many of you took your concern "to the Lord in prayer." I'm embarrassed by the attention and yet I wouldn't be this far without your prayers. Thank you. I am forever grateful.

So, in some ways James' instructions are being followed.

*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.*

Thanks be to God.

James is direct and dogmatic, there's little nuance, 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 you thunder on or if you can barely whisper,
if you just keep praying, one day God will heal, raise, and forgive.

But, truth be told, it's hardly that simple.

It's hard to ignore the empirical evidence....

After the ICU, I spent 2 weeks on the trauma floor of Christ Hospital and I now go to therapy 5 days a week. In both settings there are people who will probably remain profoundly disabled. And not for lack of prayer. While we may know marvelous stories of answered prayer and miraculous healing, there's also the reality of prayers that didn't

bring health. And while we don't have an eternal perspective, we do know of faithful people, bent in humble petition, who aren't made well. We know people earnestly praying for restoration only to continue in brokenness. There's a mystery here.

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 they 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 a half years in a drought. 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 take a shine 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's a 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'm not sure how to put the imperative alongside the empirical. And, in that I'm not alone. Martin Luther didn't cotton to James either. At one point he's reported 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 our text trying to make the references to health and healing about 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 something that holds together the imperative and the empirical?

What are we to make of this mystery?

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 Jesus prayed and taught us to pray, it is hard to frame the journey of faith without some manner of prayer. Prayer is part of following Jesus.

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.

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 sin 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. Prayer is an experience of community.

When I first started at Hope there were three-colorful-widowed-sisters who every Sunday sat front and center. Bernice, Betty, and Evelyn would pass out mints before the sermon and then chirp and cackle away like birds on a wire.

When Evelyn 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 as her boys gathered around her bed, holding her hand, we prayed. And, when I didn't know what else to say I reminded Evelyn that her church was praying for her 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 for 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, and Cathy Larsen. Again, her eyes lit up and from her hospital bed we 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's the collective recognition that there is more than just the reality that we see. It's the collective faith that God is attentive, active, and not out to lunch. It's the collective expression of longing and even lament for others. It's 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 a wonderful gift of Hope Church. One of the challenges that we face is how to enfold others into that web. How can those who have been nurtured in this web create new space for others?

There's a whole host of prayer practices, types of prayer, and expectations about prayer. My best guess is that many of us struggle with prayer.

We whisper a hopeful word before a big test, big race, or just before another sermon. We lay awake and think through our lives in a prayerful spirit and drift off to sleep. We have moments of deepest longing – something beyond words. 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 listen to prayers,
we wait on prayers,
we keep lists of prayers,
we're prayer weaklings,
we enlist prayer warriors,
we think of prayer as self-talk,
we pray in desperation: God help. God thanks.

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

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, the practice of Jesus, and the imperative of James is to pray.

May we pray with each other and for each other. I'm forever grateful that you interceded for me. 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. And in our praying may we know God, the secret desire of all our prayers.

Amen.