

## **Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd**

### **Pastor Scott Trevithick**

Date: September 26, 2021, Yr. B 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Text: James 5:13-20

Title: Reconnecting

Focus: James urges us to pray when experiencing suffering, good cheer, or sickness.

Prayer has the power to reconnect us to one another and to God.

### **Epistle Reading: James 5:13-20**

*Marks of the Christian community include praying for those who are sick and in need, celebrating with those in good health, restoring those who have strayed, confessing sins to one another, and offering forgiveness to each other.*

<sup>13</sup>Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. <sup>14</sup>Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup>The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup>Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. <sup>17</sup>Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. <sup>18</sup>Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

<sup>19</sup>My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, <sup>20</sup>you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

### **The Text and Our Own Context**

Each week, with occasional variations, the lectionary presents designated texts from the Old Testament, from the Psalms, from a New Testament letter we call *epistles*, and from one of the gospels. And the preacher is challenged to identify a theme and focus from one of those texts or common to those texts and hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

And, as preacher, you are not just listening to or digging into the texts themselves, but also to the context of our lives and to reflect on what circumstances or challenges we may face and listen for what word God may have for us in the midst of those challenges. The preaching task includes reflecting on the texts and also reflecting on our lives—on the common life of our community and the individual lives within that community. As the pastor and preacher from within this community, I as preacher come to the texts on behalf of the community. The preacher is listening to the texts and to God's Spirit within those texts, and also listening to what's going on in our lives and in our particular circumstance.

I've described how the Tuesday Bible Study group is a part of this reflection process for me. Because (at least in the way I view it,) a group study is not a static event with someone like me having knowledge and then dumping that knowledge into

the heads of others, as though I am simply imparting it to others. In contrast, I would say that there is a greater mutuality or partnership in the shared discovery that is taking place. Certainly, there are factual sorts of things to be pointed out. There are resources to access if you have a question about the meaning of a particular word or want to check “What’s a denarius?” or to find where a particular town is located. Those are all factual sorts of things that can be accessed, and that factual knowledge shared.

But, beyond getting at the who, what, and where sorts of questions, there is a process of discovery and self-awareness and insight that comes from reading and reflecting together and also asking, “What does this mean for me?” and “What might God’s Spirit be saying to this particular community now?”

## Reflecting on Today’s Texts and Narrowing the Focus

So, for this particular week, the Lectionary presents us with multiple texts to consider:

- **The text from Numbers** and focusing on transitions and adaptability and leadership development as people found their leadership role . . .
- **And the gospel text** and thinking about stumbling blocks in our culture and how we contribute to creating conditions that prevent people from the fullness of life which God intends.

Part of the intrigue of Bible study is taking time to explore more than one text. Part of the discipline of preaching is to take that study and reflection and hone it down to a focus that can be addressed in one setting. And so, the preacher must make choices. So, while I’d be interested in taking on the challenge of preaching from one of these two texts I’ve briefly described, I’ve made the choice to listen attentively to the reading from James.

## The Practical, Pastoral Wisdom of James. . .

As I have said when preaching from James chapter 1 a few weeks ago, James is concerned with practical pastoral wisdom and the coherence between faith and daily living. The way that those themes from the whole book are expressed in this passage is in the way that James directly speaks to people in need:

- <sup>13</sup>Are any among you suffering?
- Are any cheerful?
- <sup>14</sup>Are any among you sick?

To put it in our own contemporary way:

- “What’s going on? What’s happening” What are you experiencing? What’s affecting you and your family? How is school going? How is work, how is life, how are things?”

James asks direct questions, the kind a good friend would ask. Imagine yourself receiving a phone call or sitting down with a long-time, trusted friend and you have time

to talk. They're asking, and they really want to know. How are things going? How are you doing?

*Heavy sigh. . .* "Well. . ." What would you say, if you were being honest?

- "The aches and pains I've grown accustomed to over the years seem to be adding up. It seems like I hardly ever leave the house except for medical appointments. What if something really big were to happen? I don't want to move, but can I continue to care for myself?"
- Are you experiencing weariness as a caregiver?

Or is it . . .

- Uncertainty with your own upcoming health tests and procedures?
- Day-to-day challenges of living with a life-limiting, chronic condition. . .
- Frustration with continued COVID restrictions? The availability of vaccinations in the spring brought the promise of renewed activity and interaction and we had a period of time in which we were out and about in public places not wearing masks. And then the Delta variant caused cases to increase.
- Health care professionals are emotionally weary and physically exhausted, and facilities have had to resume restrictions on visitation and, in some locations and cases, have had to reschedule or limit medical care.<sup>1</sup>
- Are your emotional and mental health affected by having come through an extended period of isolation and restriction? And do you ask yourself what activities do you feel comfortable resuming and what seem too risky given your circumstance? We like regularity and predictability and right now we're living in limbo or in unsettled times.
- Maybe in your stage of life the primary challenge is balancing responsibilities to work, caring for children, church and community relationships, and may include caring for aging parents as well.
- Are you in a period of transition in your life, wondering what to do next or asking how you'd like to spend your time? That's an opportunity, but it's also stressful.

## **Back to James. . .**

James asks those questions and then gives guidance about the circumstances he anticipates:

- <sup>13</sup>Are any among you suffering?
  - They should pray.
- Are any cheerful?
  - They should sing songs of praise.
- <sup>14</sup>Are any among you sick?
  - They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Locally, St. Mary's Medical Center, for instance, has recently restricted the number of visitors.

One thing that's striking to me is that James urges them to pray whatever they may be experiencing.

- Are you suffering? Pray.
- Cheerful? Sing praises.
- Sick? Gather others from the church to offer prayers for you.

The practical wisdom he offers reminds me of Paul's writing to the Thessalonians: "<sup>16</sup>Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup>pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup>give thanks in all circumstances. . . (1 Thessalonians 5).

James reminds or encourages them to pray, whether the circumstance is suffering, being cheerful, or experiencing sickness. No matter what we're experiencing, pray.

Paul similarly says, "rejoice always," suggesting that rejoicing or living with joy is more dependent upon one's orientation or outlook than one's particular circumstances.

A church member recently told me about an unfortunate medical diagnosis she has recently received. She matter-of-factly told me about the diagnosis and the limited treatment options and then just as quickly began expressing thanks for the life she has lived in companionship with her husband and for the gratitude she has for relationships with family and friends and so many positive things.

I think she was honest about the uncertain medical circumstance and clearly that's not good news, but she also responded to that by recognizing so many blessings in her life. I thought, "When I am her age, I'd like to be like that," which I think is how James would have us be.

I think what James and Paul say in pastoral wisdom are helpful correctives to what's probably our usual orientation to prayer—we too often think of it or function as though it is our personal wish list to present to God.

James is writing to a community of faith and encourages those who are sick to call for *the elders*, leaders in the church to pray with and for them and anoint them with oil. Prayer is not limited to an individual, personal act, but a shared or communal act that can reconnect us not just with God, but with one another.

Isn't *that* part of what we in our own circumstance are longing for? **Connection?** Aren't we longing for connection? Aren't we longing for relational and emotional connection that has been hampered by physical separation and isolation or *disconnection*? And maybe that disconnection is not just expressed as isolation from one another, but from God. **Let us pray for that. Let us pray for reconnection.**

### **James makes some strong assertions about prayer. . .**

James makes some strong statements about prayer; let's be careful about how we hear that.

“<sup>15</sup>The prayer of faith will save the sick. . . (5:15)

“The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” (5:16b)

James says, “. . . *will* save the sick.” Interesting verb, wouldn’t you say?

A caution here. . .

A pastor-scholar whose writing I have come to appreciate and trust says<sup>2</sup>

This can be a difficult saying.

I believe that if we pray, we frequently see miracles. I also know that no amount of Jesus’ prayers in the garden changed God’s mind about the upcoming crucifixion. James himself was stoned to death in the vicinity of the temple. We must not turn James’ counsel into a tool of abuse to those who suffer and are not healed, despite praying in faith. Paul himself prayed for relief (from his “thorn in the flesh” but wasn’t granted it (2 Corinthians 12:8-9). James is giving encouragement that prayer can and does save lives. And we need to be faithful to pray. Obviously, not all earthly lives will be saved through prayer. But we still pray to the God who is faithful.

### **From the *Presbyterian Study Catechism*<sup>3</sup>**

My orientation to prayer is helped by these questions and responses from a contemporary catechism:

Question 121. What is the purpose of prayer?

Prayer brings us into communion with God. . . Through prayer God frees us from anxiety, equips us for service, and deepens our faith.

Question 122. How does God respond to our prayers?

God takes all our prayers into account, weighing them with divine wisdom, and responding to them by a perfect will. . . God answers our prayers, particularly for temporal blessings, only in ways that are compatible with the larger purposes of God’s glory and our salvation. Communion with God is finally the answer within the answers to all our prayers.

I’ve been using the word *connection* or *reconnection*. The church-word used in this catechism response, *communion*, essentially means the same thing. It’s highlighting prayer as the way to commune or connect with God. That’s prayer’s primary purpose, say these two questions and responses.

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<sup>2</sup> Cory Driver. Lectionary Blog: “Lifesaving Action” for Sept. 26, 2021 (Posted 9/20/2021)  
<https://www.livinglutheran.org/2021/09/lectionary-blog-lifesaving-action/>

<sup>3</sup> Approved by the 210th General Assembly (1998) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

**A Prayer for Healing<sup>4</sup>:**

By your power, great God, our Lord Jesus healed the sick and gave new hope to the hopeless. **Though we cannot command or possess your power,**<sup>5</sup> we pray for those who want to be healed (especially for N.). Mend their wounds, soothe fevered brows, and make broken people whole again. Help us to welcome every healing as a sign that, though death is against us, you are for us, and have promised renewed and risen life in Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.

**Note:**

We have scheduled a service for Wholeness and Healing for October 17.

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<sup>4</sup> From Prayers and Ministry with the Sick in the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1993, p. 988. Originally appeared in the *Worshipbook.*, The Westminster Press, c. 1970.

<sup>5</sup> God is not like a Santa Clause to whom we submit our wish list or like the Genie which comes from Aladdin's Lamp when we rub it.