

September 26, 2021

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-41, 49-50

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“The prayer of faith,” says James “will save the sick.”

In my second call to a congregation we lived in a smallish community, where many people were connected through school, work, extended families, and church in webs that intersected and combined day to day. One of the primary topics of conversation when we first got there was the fact that another church had bought a strip mall, converted it into an auditorium, brought in a pretty good praise band, and was swiftly sucking up former Presbyterians, Methodists, and Lutherans.

They had it going on--hands raised in worship, great activities for kids, powerful preaching, and great music. Until their music pastor got sick. (His wife was a teacher at our church’s preschool.)

One thing dominoed into another until he had to be hospitalized. Members from his church came to visit, the elders came to pray, the head pastor came to pray and their message across the board was the same: “If you only have enough faith, you will get well.” and the awful variation “You must not have enough faith in Jesus; that’s why you’re not getting better.”

These messages were received with outward tolerance and inner anguish, but after all, this was their community and they needed these people now more than ever. He unfortunately did not get better--as death drew near someone in that interconnected web passed on what had been a secret: He was dying because of AIDS. (Some of you lived through these days, and so you know the stigma, the fear, the prejudice which accompanied that disease.)

The visits stopped. The encouragement to believe was silent. Those who thought of themselves as faithful followers of Jesus stayed away. I’m guessing the prayers continued in some way, but we might also guess that the content of those prayers changed. The shiny church agreed to hold his funeral, but only if nothing bordering on reality was mentioned.

How Christian communities so often politely turn away from all kinds of vulnerability and hurt. How the grace and lovingkindness of Jesus has over and over been turned into a hammer of guilt and shame. Perhaps you have been on the receiving end of that cruelty; or perhaps with grim honesty we recognize ourselves in those who prefer to turn away. It is a far cry from the Jesus we meet in the Gospels, who entered into all of life and who was so vulnerable himself.

The writer of the book of James would not have thought that their words would be lifted out of context and used as a kind of proverb. If you've been listening over the last few weeks, you've heard verses directed at an early Christian community and their life together. Just as we might do today, these followers of Jesus were trying to figure out how they were to live together, how they were to be *different* from others in a way that would show Jesus' love. The letter is full of suggestions meant to be encouraging: listen, do good to others, don't play favorites, watch what you say, give, be humble, be patient, and today--pray, confess, and sing.

Martin Luther disliked the book of James *a lot*--he thought there was too much do/don't do and not enough Jesus. But I wonder if the book, and our verses today, are actually a powerful grace-filled antidote to a faith that pretends and is somehow anesthetized to real life?

Pray James says--not just as individuals, but as a community. We do that, don't we--every Sunday one of us gets up and invites all of us to talk together with God, bringing our concerns for 'the church, the world, and all in need.' "Ohhhhh," young people often say "that part is sooooo long." Well, there's a lot to pray for! If we listen, we hear that we are joining in prayers that embrace and lift our reality to God, who has promised to listen--prayers about violence, climate change, anguish, hope, joy, inequality and injustice. At their best, they are not *fake* prayers that ignore real life--they shape us to be an honest Body of Christ in this place.

Confess your sins James adds. We'd really rather not, right? Who wants to say 'I screwed up....*again*.' We'd like to pretend--but our worship together won't let us. It insists that we begin with humility *together*: "we have gone astray; we exploit; we are apathetic" we say. Truth-telling, isn't it--together. So wait a minute--if

we're *all* saying we've sinned, then no one can judge. We're all vulnerable, weak, forgetful--and *forgiven*, too, by the love of Christ that refuses to *not* love us even in all our messiness.

And James says **sing songs of praise**. I would venture that this is the only place where many of us regularly sing with a group of people. The hymns, the liturgy that we sing are not just place-holders in worship--they lift us outside ourselves and gather our voices together; and most often they tell a story--a story that reminds us of Christ's life, love, and invitation to the world and to each one of us. The deepest worship songs and anthems speak to the realities of life and also to the reality of our life in Christ, where we are welcomed, gathered, embraced, and also sent to serve.

James will just have nothing to do with faith in Christ that is detached from the real world or real people. The writer knows what we so often forget: Jesus' life and ministry was focused on weak people, sick people, scared people, foolish people, sinful people...like us. Jesus entered into our human life fully, pouring out *his* life in love. Do you see, do you hear the invitation in that? Jesus invites us to live vulnerably as well--embracing both the life we've been given and other people with love and compassion.