

“Search Party” GPPC 9-30-18
Psalm 124, James 5:13-20

So if you've been in worship here the last two Sundays, you've heard a lot from James. Two weeks ago, he warned us about the power of the human tongue, how we use our speech for good or evil. Last week he contrasted the false wisdom of selfish ambition, envy, boastfulness, and falsehood with the true “wisdom from above” that is “pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.”

James is not exactly a “non-directive” counselor, is he? And that's a good thing not only for the time when this was written but for our time when there's been a loss of a moral center not only in our personal lives and the life of the church but indeed in the leadership of our nation.

This week, James finishes his letter by speaking to the church and telling the church how to live more faithfully in quite specific ways.

“Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick?

Jeff Paschal

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.”

So James really covers a lot of territory for prayer, doesn’t he? We should pray when we’re suffering, happy, and sick. A Jewish writer said, “I only pray when I am in trouble, but I am in trouble all the time. So I am always praying.” (Isaac Bashevis Singer)

True, isn’t it? I remember going on a six-mile run out in the country near our house one summer day. It was what runners call an “out and back course.” You run three miles out; turn around and run three miles back home. I started out and it was a warm, sunny day, and the wind was at my back. The course was very hilly, but I felt pretty good with the wind pushing me along. At last I came to the end of the three miles out and I turned around to come home. And as I turned I was shocked to see what was behind me and had been behind me for some time—dark clouds, full of rain, some lightning, the grumble of thunder in the distance, and now the wind blowing against me all the way. I pumped my arms and willed my legs to move, but it was hard to go, and I prayed that I would get home safely.

Jeff Paschal

We think our life is going just fine. The sun's shining. The wind is at our back. We're strong, knocking out the hills like they're nothing. We don't really need God, right? We don't really need the church, right? And prayer to God our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, well that's just wishful thinking for the unenlightened.

Except we are actually finite, frail human beings, utterly dependent upon God for every bite we eat, every drink we swallow, every breath we take, every moment of existence we enjoy. You'd think the least we could do is keep our baptismal promises and gather with other Christians to pray, sing a few songs of praise, and listen for God speaking in scripture and proclamation. And then that we might even be grateful with the generous giving of our time, abilities, and money.

You'd think. But we are a forgetful people who cannot recall who has given and gives us all we have. And we are a people deluded into thinking we are doing just fine on our own. (I struggle with this too!)

James tries to bring us back to our senses. He basically tells us to pray all the time, but especially at certain times. When we're suffering. "Help me, God!" When we're cheerful by singing songs of praise. When

Jeff Paschal

we're sick, not only with our own prayers, but by calling in the heavy artillery, the elders of the church, who are not only supposed to show up when they're called but who are supposed to anoint the sick person with oil "in the name of the Lord."

Now we know, and they knew, that oil isn't magical. So why anoint somebody with oil? Maybe at least in part because it is physical, and the physical matters. So when somebody is sick, church members show up not merely on Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook, but in person. In the body. Because the Christian faith is an embodied faith. Jesus was resurrected in the body, a new kind of recognizable body, not merely as a pleasant memory or a fervent wish. We are embodied people who believe in the resurrection of the body.

We believe that the physical, not just the spiritual, is important. That's why we come here *in the flesh* to be with each other and to touch each other not in creepy ways (heaven forbid!) but in ways that show how much we respect and value each other as brothers and sisters.

And as James tells us, this is also where we confess our sins to each other and pray for each other, because this is a place where we can

Jeff Paschal

be honest about who we are, how we've been faithful and unfaithful as individuals and as a community. Presbyterian writer Anne Lamott says, "Prayer is taking a chance that against all odds and past history, we are loved and chosen, and do not have to get it together before we show up. The opposite may be true: We may not be able to get it together until after we show up in such miserable shape." (Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow*, 5-6.)

So we come in here on Sundays and confess our sins not just as individuals but as a church and as a nation. We come in here to be honest. And we come to be reconciled with God and with each other. In a world especially focused these days on nurturing grudges and revenge, this is a powerful witness.

But then again James says the prayers of faithful people are "powerful and effective." Prayer is not magic. And we do not control God like a genie. But prayer is powerful. When people pray, often there is physical healing (though all of us will die eventually). Sometimes there's spiritual healing. Sometimes we are given wisdom in perplexity and courage to face our circumstances. Sometimes those circumstances

Jeff Paschal

themselves change. Through prayer, people forgive each other. People feel God's forgiveness for themselves. The isolation that we sometimes feel from sickness or from sin is overcome, and we're restored to community. All of this happens through prayer—personal and corporate.

And true prayer is not perfunctory, "You're in our thoughts and prayers," and then on to the next thing. No. True prayer eventually leads to action. Over time, and sometimes immediately, prayer changes us, and leads us to engagement. As James puts it, "My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wandered from the truth and is brought back by another, 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."

That's a lot to take in, isn't it? One Bible scholar explains. "In closing, James encourages members of the Christian community to have greater care and concern for one another. Sin is a fact of life, and Christians do wander away at times 'from the truth' and from the community. James focuses not on the person who sins, but on the

Jeff Paschal

responsibility incumbent upon other Christians to seek actively to restore the sinner.

“Christians are not to give up on each other! We have a responsibility for brothers and sisters in Christ who wander from our fellowship. We are to seek to win them back and preserve them from error. When confronted with human sin, our attitude is always to be one of restoration rather than condemnation.” (Frances Taylor Gench, *Hebrews and James*, 125-126.)

Do you see where prayer leads and what James calls the church to construct? Do you see? He calls us to construct a search party, a search party to bring home those who’ve wandered from the truth and from the community. This is to be done with humility, but also with confidence and persistence because we are showing our care not our superiority.

Can you think of someone in this congregation who has wandered away and not found a new spiritual home? Maybe God is calling you to be a part of the search party to bring her back.

Do you want to see this sanctuary filled every week, not just Christmas Eve and Easter? And do you want your own spiritual life to

Jeff Paschal

be renewed as well? Then start with prayer--constant, trusting, speaking and listening, prayer. Recommit to regular corporate worship yourself. And then see if God does not also call you to start bringing people back home.

“I only pray when I am in trouble, but I am in trouble all the time. So I am always praying.” And because I am always praying, I care enough to be a part of the search party to bring others home. Thanks be to God who will not rest until all the children, all of them, come home. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal