

If Not...Who Could Stand?
Psalm 124; James 5:16-20

These are the last verses of James's letter, in which he finishes calling his congregation back to the wisdom of God. You see, they had been led by the wisdom of the world into all kinds of trouble, not the least of which was the divisions that sin and sickness had caused among them. James does not try to explain how this happened; rather, James gives them concrete things to do: pray for one another, sing songs of praise, call for the elders, anoint with oil, confess to one another, bring wanderers back home.

James is calling the disciples of his congregation and of congregations of the Twenty-first Century to concentrate their efforts on things of God. Today, I want us to think on these very concrete ways that James' letter speaks to us.

It was like most Sunday mornings- I got to church before any other cars were in the parking lot, went up the stairs, down the hall, turning on lights as I went, and into my office. As I began my usual preparation for worship, a woman whom I knew only by name appeared at my door. I greeted her with great enthusiasm, expressing my delight that she was at church. She shifted from one foot to the other, rather nervously. I enquired if there was anything in particular I could do for her. Her hesitation said "yes" but her words said "no". She turned to leave and I made a mental note to try and contact her next week, maybe ask to visit in her home.

A few days later I gave her a call and asked if I could come by. Answering in the affirmative, I went immediately to the address I had been given. I was warmly received and her husband joined us in the living room. She began to talk, "I have cancer." And then the words just tumbled forth, hurriedly out of her mouth with little control from her. In the jumble of words I understood her to say, "I was listening to the radio, and the speaker was talking about bringing the elders of the church to pray over the sick, and anoint them. "Do YOU ever do that?"

"Would you ever do that?"

Now, I had only served three Presbyterian churches since my ordination. I was familiar enough with the scripture that I knew that more than one passage directs that the elders should come to the sick and lay hands on, praying for healing. However, I had never experienced it and was not sure exactly how I felt about facilitating such an event. I'll pray about it and call a couple of the elders who might know more about this than I, and that I would get back in touch with her.

And I did. A few days later I went to her home, with three elders who were available and willing to participate. I read this passage of scripture from James and asked her if there was anything she wished to confess. I really did not expect her to respond, after all she had not attended church very often (mostly Christmas and Easter) and did not participate in any of the programs of the church. However, after a long pause, she cleared her throat and it began to pour out, confessions, in the presence of her husband, the elders and me. I immediately began to think, "We didn't have a class on this at WFU!" However, I realized in that moment

that we were truly in the presence of God. She was making confessions about things she needed to make peace about.

I tried to follow the directives of this passage of scripture as close as possible. I prayed. The elders prayed. She prayed. Her husband prayed. We sang. Then I anointed her with oil and prayed for her healing.

Are any among you suffering? They should pray.

Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.

Are any among you sick? They should call the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

The prayers of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.

And anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

Therefore, confess your sins to one another

And pray for one another, so that you may be healed.

This was an early Christian community, but they were struggling. Some were in need of forgiveness. Some were in trouble. You don't need confession, intercession, and healing unless there is sin, trouble and sickness.

You know, sometimes I think we in the church have a picture of what the community of faith looks like- all smiles, sunshine, no problems, no disagreements, no needs or sickness. But we all know that is unrealistic. Life happens! There is gossip. Pride gets in the way. Teenage situations are not pleasant. The workplace often lacks integrity. Disease comes calling.

James wrote to the early church, and to us, so we might see our sin, and troubles, and sickness in a new way - as occasions for God's gifts of confession, intercession and healing - these spiritual practices to become a part of who we are as disciples of God.

I have come to recognize that there is no greater privilege in ministry than to be with God's beloved children in times of confession, offering up prayers on their behalf and praying for their ultimate healing, according to God's divine plan.

Healing is not magic...It does not replace medicine or psychotherapy...it is not the same as curing...healing is mystery. Healing is relational. It is the relation of mind, body, and spirit. It is our relationship with each other. It is our relationship with God. Authentic healing is the work of Christ, the great physician.

We prayed for that church member that day. She got better. She lived about 18 months - 18 months attending church, taking part in Bible Study, joining a Sunday school class that was very supportive and held her family close. She became their sister in Christ. She became a valuable part of the Body of Christ. We prayed for her healing and she died anyway. So what does it mean when James writes, "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise

them up." I believe that verse has at least two meanings. First, when Jesus healed he would sometimes say, "Rise up and walk." Second, the Lord will raise them up may also refer to the resurrection, which is, through the lens of faith, the ultimate healing. In this case, the healing was two-fold. She was healed of the guilt that had held her down and not allowed her to join in the faith community. And, ultimately she was healed, and resurrected to life eternal with God through Jesus Christ.

I think God sent this woman into my life for a purpose. I think God sent her to teach me that my highly educated mind needed to be broadened, helping me grow toward a sign of the kingdom. And, I would offer to you that, today you have the opportunity to grow in accepting the gifts God has given us.

Today, are any among you suffering? They should pray.

Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.

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.

The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.

And anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

Therefore, confess your sins to one another

And pray for one another, so that you may be healed.

Amen.