

James 5:13-20
October 4, 2009

South Plains

Just One

Today is World Communion Sunday when we recognize that Christians all over the world will lift this cup and bread in thanksgiving to God who saves us in Christ. Among the core practices that unite people of faith, even people who do not believe in Jesus Christ as we do, is the practice of prayer. Despite some skeptics, I believe it is salutary and good for me as a Christian to join in prayer to God with non-Christians. I believe this for two reasons: First, because there is only one God; and second, because some experiences remind us of our common humanity, no matter how different we may be.

In the year 2000, my family was part of a group of 24 people ranging in age from 23 to 71 who gathered from different parts of the world with a single desire. We wanted to raft the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. I still marvel at the social skills of the river guides who made this collection of people jell into a community. What is it that creates a network of human interaction so that people feel connected with each other? The book of James might say it is the way we talk among ourselves. By the second day on the river, we had shared a little about our backgrounds. By the third day we were applauding each other's small victories in mastering the rafts. By the fourth day we were learning to respect secrets about our companions. I'll tell you

about the fifth day later. James would say that conversation with and about our friends is one of the surest ways either to cement or to destroy community.

We don't know much about the author or the circumstances he addresses. What we do know is that James speaks succinctly to people who want to behave like Christians and to become a Christian church. These final verses offer two quick examples and then three more extended descriptions of the faith community in action. Each example takes us deeper into Christian fellowship, each step demanding more faith, each behavior plunging us more profoundly into the mind of Christ.

James is convinced there is a difference between life in Christ and life apart from Jesus Christ. The difference comes out in our conversation. For instance, when someone asks us, "How are you today?" we can reply and often do with a stock answer. We might say, "Oh, so, so." I sometimes hear, "Oh, the same old, same old." My friend who was in jail at the time, answered me this way: "I'm scuffin'. I'm scuffin'." If somebody is having a really bad day, they might say, "It's just one thing after another." Most of these replies are conversation stoppers. They mean to say, "Thanks for asking, but I don't want to talk about my life right now."

Notice the contrast between these conversation stoppers and the recommendation from James. "Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any

cheerful? They should sing.... Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over the...." James is suggesting that in times of real crisis we need to acknowledge the transcendent. We need to reach beyond ourselves. We need to gather our resources of friendship and faith and turn our attention to the God who promises help. This is expressive, revealing speech.

Of course, James has specific practices of faith in mind. He wants the elders to pray over and anoint the sick. To our scientific minds, we might hear this advice as quaint and old fashioned. But James is after more than medicine. He wants healing of body and spirit and soul. When I was hospitalized with a concussion, a colleague visited and offered to pray. "Sure," I said. I could not find the words to acknowledge my gratitude. Twenty-two years later, I remember the thanks I felt for his friendship in Christ. Praying for the sick is basic, part of the foundation of the Christian life.

The next step in James' advice goes deeper and demands more faith. "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up." I think the words are deliberately ambiguous. Christine Bartholomew has lost her hair in cancer therapy. She avoids healing services where the preacher commands the sick to rise out of their wheelchairs and beds. She has been prayed over many times and anointed with oil. She writes, "I know that I am saved even if the lupus stays in my body,

and that God is still to be glorified if I am sick (*Christian Century*, 9.22.09, p. 20)."

Jesus chose ambiguity to reply to the paralytic in Mark's gospel, "Son your sins are forgiven." Any illness and any sin is a profound challenge to the integrity of the community of faith. Sin and disease both alienate people from each other. But, the community can and does fight that alienation when we pray for one another because we are nurturing friendships in Christ, praying for mind and body and spirit.

Yet, James pushes us further. "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed." This is deep water. Our 21st century reaction to hearing a friend confess their sins would most likely be to say something like, "Oh, everybody slips occasionally. We all make mistakes. Don't worry about it." When we gloss over sins, we deny our friends forgiveness and release and real community.

James is not quite done with us. "Whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." We are so out of practice at forgiving sin that we avoid the old-fashioned idea of saving a soul. It is true that Christians are sometimes insensitive and even stupid in confronting sin. But, the truth is that the world and the church are full of wanderers; and some of us wander in directions dangerous to ourselves and to others. What James is talking about here is bearing one another's sins. We

venture into this territory only when our relationships within the community have been tried and tested and affirmed by other Christians so that we have assurance of the support and blessing of the community of faith. Here is what it means to love one another as Christ loves us.

Many of us will say that saving a person or hearing confession is the job of the minister. I can do no better than to quote Moses. "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:29) We need to practice that great Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers – each Christian is a priest to his neighbor.

I have a modest fantasy, a dream I want to share. Imagine what would happen if every person in South Plains Presbyterian Church were to pray for just one person for the next twelve months. Pray for health, or spiritual growth, or reconciliation,... for the whole comucopia of blessings that God alone can grant. I believe it would change this church. It would change this community. I believe it we would find ourselves a more caring, healthy church as well as a more prayerful church.

The great prayer of thanksgiving that we make before the Lord's Supper deliberately touches the anchor points of Christian fellowship and community. Prayer is an interesting phenomenon today. We are more likely than ever before to hear prayer for us and our neighbors

from all kinds of unlikely sources. We pray at IMPACT meetings, despite and because of the presence of Christians, Jews and Muslims. We pray because we need to pray. I pray you and I will feel that need more and more.

On our fifth day on the Colorado River, we came to the rapids our guides had been preparing us to run. Lava Falls is the most dangerous set of rapids in that part of the canyon. We pulled our rafts to the shore and hiked up above the falls and scouted our route. The river guides huddled together, then the trip leader gave us last minute instructions. Just before getting into the rafts, he did something completely out of character with the rest of the trip. He offered a prayer. I remember his words.

God, if you exist, help us get through Lava.
If you don't, leave us alone. Amen.

As we pushed away from the bank, I heard the guides wishing one another, "Good run, brother Win. Sister Trish, good run." And, we were off.

On that day, we became a community in prayer.