

First Presbyterian Church of Redlands

Sunday, February 23, 2020

Rev. Cheryl Raine

The First Reading is Ephesians 6:18-20

¹⁸ ***Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.*** To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

The Second Reading is James 13-28

¹³ Are any among you suffering? ***They should pray.*** Are any cheerful? ***They should sing songs of praise.*** ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ ***The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.*** ¹⁶ 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.*** ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Then he ***prayed again,*** and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

The Message is Entitled, *Prayer of Faith*

Today we come to our final week on the Letter of James, as this Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent with the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday. Community pastors, including myself, will be at Ed Hale Park from 11:30 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. on Wednesday, so make your way to State Street if you would like to participate in this ancient practice of remembering the sacredness of life, for we are reminded by the ashes that we are dust and that to dust we will return. The ashes also symbolize dying to ourselves and rising in Christ, for the old has died and the new has come. The ashes remind us of the fragility of life and the importance of living each day in the Lord. So, next Sunday, we will begin our Lenten Series entitled, "*Roll Down, Justice.*" We will gather as the whole church at 10:00 A.M. on March 1st.

But, back to James for today. You might remember that at the beginning of this series on James, I mentioned that there are far more sermons than just six in this particular letter of only five chapters, for James is packed with practical wisdom for our daily walk of faith. I chose six particular passages, but skipped as many, according to Max Lucado who wrote a 12-week study guide on this letter.

So, if you haven't had the chance to sit down and read James from beginning to end, I still encourage you to do so. The letter is convicting for it bluntly reminds us of the work that is yet to be done in each of us and as a gathered community. I read through James once again as I prepared for this final sermon and what I noticed is twofold. First, its apparent that the hearers of James were encountering difficulties and struggles. Their faith did not exempt them from the realities of life, both the good and the bad, the joy and the sorrow. We certainly know this to be true for ourselves as well. Sure, there are periods of smooth sailing filled with happiness and joy in our lives. Yet, there are also times when disease, tragedy, despair, death and darkness descend. Throughout the letter James encourages his hearers to stand firm in the faith fueled by the resurrected Christ who conquered death.

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What I noticed next, is that James began his letter by encouraging his readers to pray for God's wisdom in order to navigate these realities of life. And then James closes his letter by encouraging his readers to pray, yet again. This encouragement isn't about praying to magically sustain circumstances that are good or change circumstances that are challenging though; it's about establishing a practice of prayer that engages us relationally with the mystery we call God so that no matter what we face, we will know we are not alone. Whether we face trouble or happiness, sickness or the need for forgiveness, or anything else James says we are to pray to the One who hears.

This all-the-time encouragement mirrors the Psalms, for it has been pointed out that most of the 150 psalms seem to say to God: Help, Thanks or Wow, which covers most of life's circumstances. Apostle Paul also reminds the church in Ephesus of the necessity of prayer saying, "Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication." And to the church in Philippi, he says, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Or more succinctly Paul says to the church in Thessalonica, "Pray without ceasing." Paul and James agree yet again saying that prayer is essential to our faith. Or as reformer Martin Luther once said, "To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing."

Prayer is not to be our last resort though. It is to be an integral practice permeating our whole lives, even when God's answer is "no" or "not yet," instead of "yes." James offers these practical words in light of the answer of "no" and "not yet." James says, "Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord." I remember when I first read this passage a series of questions filled my thoughts: Be patient? Be patient until Christ comes again? Be patient... like waiting 2,000 years? Really God?

Patience is not easy for those of us schooled in a culture that demands instantaneous results. Our culture created frozen dinners and the fast food industry. I'm sure we created the 30-minute sitcom, too, where significant dilemmas are always neatly resolved in each episode. It seems we want what we want even when we pray! "No" and "not yet" are not acceptable. And when we don't get what we want when we want it from God, we grumble. We grumble and complain and then grumble and complain against one another. Do you remember what James said to us last week, "Do not your conflicts and disputes come from your own cravings?" Even in prayer our own cravings get in the way!

That is why James encourages us to, "Be patient." Set aside your cravings and wait on the Lord. Let your desires be known and then wait patiently. If you want to know what patience looks like James suggests we should observe a farmer. A farmer tills the soil and plants the seeds, but then the farmer has to wait for the precious crops to grow. The farmer must be patient for both the early and the late rains. The farmer does everything in his power and then the farmer has to wait. James gives us one more example of patience and it is one that addresses those times in our life when things go awry. We are to have the endurance of Job, says James, for Job didn't curse God for his misfortune even though Job lost everything he loved and then some more. Job remained faithful in the midst of terrible tragedy, never blaming or giving up on God. Throughout scripture we hear these words, "Lord is compassionate and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love," and Job never lost

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hope in this truth. So, James encourages us, saying, “Be patient... beloved.” Be patient with God in your waiting for answers and be patient with each other.

Yet, this is not easy when you or a loved one is faced with a life-threatening diagnosis, a termination of employment, financial ruin or betrayal. Do you remember what Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” If... if you, O God, would have just intervened this would not had happened... Lazarus would not have died, a four-year old’s heart would not have stopped, wars wouldn’t claim countless lives, human trafficking wouldn’t be a worldwide epidemic, a drunk driver wouldn’t have killed a family, cancer would not have claimed a spouse, an employee would not have been laid off, and the list could go on and on. In our pain we cry out to God. We blame God like Martha did or demand an explanation by crying out, “Why?”

In the midst of our pain James says pray, because Apostle Paul reminds us, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.” We are to offer ourselves to God in prayer trusting that the Spirit will give us the strength for whatever situation we face.

Now James did say, “The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.” Yet, we know all too well of circumstances when we have prayed for healing and death still came. This leads some to speculate that these prayers were not prayed with sincere faith, for if the prayer of faith will save and the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective, why does God not answer us with healing? Is it our fault, because we lack faith? As I mentioned earlier, James’ counsel about prayer is not that prayer is magical. His counsel reminds us that prayer is a practice that can sustain us through whatever befalls us. So, when we want answers for those times when God does not answer our fervent prayers as we had prayed, there is wisdom in letting go of “Why” and embracing “What now?”

I imagine this new question is what led Mark Barden and Nicole Hockley to start Sandy Hook Promise, for asking “Why” God didn’t stop the young man who senselessly killed their precious sons as well as others on December 14, 2012, would not have provided a way forward. Instead, the horror of that day would have ended their lives as well as their sons. The horror of that day would have led them to give up hope believing that God was impotent, absent or non-existent. But, they changed the question to “What now” and began the work of gun violence prevention programs, while mobilizing efforts for the passage of sensible state and national policy. As of today, more than 11 million educators, parents, community leaders and students have been trained and over 4.5 million supporters from 50 states are working together with them. Changing the question allows for a way forward when our prayers are not answered as we hoped.

James also reminds us of the importance of community as people of faith. The question “What now” leads James to say simply, yet profoundly, “Pray.” “Are any among you suffering? ... pray.” Cheerful... sing songs of praise, for singing is praying twice. Any sick? Gather the elders to pray. In need of forgiveness? Pray. Need patience? Pray.

Do you remember the three most common prayers: Help, Thanks or Wow? Well, “Help” seems to be an instinctive prayer for most of us. When life goes awry we fall to our knees. Churches were packed after the horror of 9/11. Churches are packed when senseless gun

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violence claims lives. Churches are packed when life goes awry and people are looking for answers. But, help is not the only prayer we are to pray.

James continues saying, "Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise." Life is a gift – thank you God! The ability to see or taste, hear or feel or smell, is a gift – thank you God. Thank you, God for declaring each of us precious, honored and loved. We gather to say thank you to God every time we worship, for this community of believers, for this church, for our mission, for God's faithfulness through us.

Yet, the prayer of "help" is mentioned again by James, "Are any sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them." Have you ever gathered others to pray over you during times of illness? Communal prayer is transformative for it demonstrates the power of the communion of saints, as we willingly gather around each other and share each other's pain.

Notice that James also talks about "forgiveness." For all of us sin and fall short of the glory of God. Each week as we worship, we join together in our prayer of confession to seek forgiveness. James assures us that anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. His counsel though goes beyond our corporate prayer of confession, for he says, "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed." Laying ourselves bare before others is frightening. Yet, as a community of faith, we are bound to need forgiveness from one another for things said or things left unsaid. Confessing our sins to one another and asking for forgiveness promotes spiritual vitality within a church. Imagine how destructive it would be if we harbored anger or resentment towards one another. Confession leads to healing and a faith community that serves God faithfully.

"Help, Thanks and Wow," provides a simple guide for prayer in our daily lives. Remember, "To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing." Friends, prayer is essential to our faith, individually and communally. Prayer connects us ever more deeply with God and with each other. It is no coincidence that James' practical letter begins and ends with a call to prayer.

May we remember ourselves to God again and again throughout each day, trusting in God's mercy and grace, steadfast love and faithfulness for each of us and for this community no matter what befalls us.

Indeed, we need thee every hour, Most Holy One, teach us your will and make us more fully like Christ with each passing day, we pray. Amen.