

SECOND READING: James 5:13-18

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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. My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, ²⁰ 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.

FIRST READING: Hebrews 5:5-10

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⁵ So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

“You are my Son, today I have begotten you”;

⁶ as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.”

⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus^b offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹ and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰ having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

This is word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

“Praying in Community”

Once there was a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. In the past it had been a thriving community that was well known and respected for its spiritual light, but over the last generation the monks had died one by one and there were now no “novices” to replace them. Besides this, the monks did not seem to be as friendly to each other. Something just wasn't right.

In the surrounding deep woods, there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town used from time to time. The monks always knew that the rabbi was home when they saw the smoke from his fire rise above the tree tops. As the abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him to ask the rabbi for advice. He, after all, was known as a great sage.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot warmly, but felt at a loss, and said that he worried about his own congregation too; people were too busy and simply not coming to the synagogue any longer. The two commiserated together and read the Torah. As the abbot was getting ready to return home the rabbi looked at him and said, "One in your home is the Messiah." (repeat).

When he arrived at the monastery the monks asked the abbot what he had learned. He responded that the rabbi had given him no concrete advice, but he had said in cryptic language, "One in your home is the Messiah." Over the next weeks the monks pondered what this might mean. Was it possible that one of them was the Messiah? If that was the case then most certainly it was Father Abbot. He had been the leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, it might be Brother Thomas, for he was a holy man and full of light. Certainly, it could not be Brother Eldred. He was crotchety and mean-spirited, but he always seems to be right, no matter what the question or situation. The rabbi could not have meant Brother Phillip, could he? He was so passive, but one has to admit that he is always there when someone needs help.

As they continued to contemplate this question, the old monks began to treat each other with great respect, on the off chance that the one they were dealing with was the Messiah, that the Messiah really was in their midst. They began to live the way of Jesus, offering up prayers and supplications as he did, treating one another with kindness and respect. Yes, they began again to pray, with each other and for each other.

Because the monastery was located in a beautiful portion of the forest it was common during the spring, summer, and fall months for families to visit and have picnics on the grounds. And people who came this year seemed to sense a change...the new spirit of care, respect and love that was present at the monastery. They witnessed the monks praying and working together with renewed energy. They returned, and returned again. One day a young man asked Father Abbot if he could join the community. Soon others inquired and joined too and after several years the community at the monastery was restored. Because of the rabbi's gift, it was again a thriving order, a brilliant light in the realm.¹

I love this story by M. Scott Peck. It is, for me, a reminder of how powerful a thing prayer is. Prayer changes things....maybe not always in the way or time we expect or desire...but yet it changes things, always for the better, for the bigger good. The monks began to pray and then they could feel the real presence of Jesus in their midst and this changed them into people who were renewed in Christ's ways. And not only that, they began to pray for and with each other! The story consequently also reminds me of this that prayer is not to be done by us as individuals only, but by us as a community of faith.

This latter direction to pray in community is made very clear in our reading today in James. James was the brother of Jesus and later leader of the Jerusalem church. He wrote to the Jewish Christians who were dispersed outside Palestine in about 69 AD. James BEGINS his letter with counsel to his readers that if they lack anything in the way of wisdom, the correct response is to turn to God in prayer, for God will respond "generously and ungrudgingly". And again HERE, in the 5th chapter, James prescribes prayers for the sick, the suffering and the sinful. He, however, emphasizes that THESE prayers are not ones done either by or for persons in isolation. James is saying that if some person in the CHURCH is suffering or sick, prayerful laying on of hands by others in the church should be done. If a member of the flock has sinned, they need confess and then be prayed over by their brothers & sisters. And these prayers should all be done "in the name of the Lord". "In effect," James Boyce says, "the assertion is

¹ M. Scott Peck. "The Rabbi's Gift" <https://www.cityyear.org/rabbis-gift>. (accessed 10/12/18).

*that IN the **corporate body's** exercise of **prayer**, the very promise and power of the resurrection, remains not just some future hope but now impinges on, recreates and sustains them.*"²

It occurs to me that this counsel by James is MORE than relevant to our time, for ours is a very individualist-oriented culture. Self-help books fill our bookstores and even our "social media", although it seems it should make us more connected, has led to a culture where interactions are between us and our individual phones. I remember the way a comedian once pointed this out. They pointed out our creep towards individualism by looking at how the names of our popular magazines have evolved. "First there was "People", then there was "Family Circle", then "Us", and now "Self"!

But James puts forth here a wisdom which belongs to the Community. It is in its exercise of prayer together. Twice James charges that confession should be "to one another" and that we should pray "for one another." This is if we have any expectation that the promised healing is to take place. James says that prayer which is exercised within and on behalf of the community is "effective". Again, I quote James Boyce, The prayer James refers to "is effective because it is exercised within the context of a community endowed with God's gifts, and because it belongs to ones who have been forgiven and empowered by the implanted word of promise in Christ Jesus."³ Ah, in community we are strengthened by the promise of the living Christ, the Messiah, in our midst...and all that comes with that.

Now, let's digress for a moment. Sometimes this concept of "effective" prayer is misunderstood. People think that what James means is that whatever we pray for, as individuals or corporately, we can expect to receive. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Master of the Universe, our Sovereign, Almighty God, is not a coke machine wherein when we put in a dollar and automatically retrieve our can of regular, diet, or vanilla coke. No, God does not belong to us to manipulate in prayer, nor use as a means of satisfying our worldly desires. Prayer with our God is meant to actually do quite the opposite. It's meant to "de-

² James Boyce. "Commentary on James 5:13-20" https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2652 (accessed 10-12-18).

³ James Boyce

center the ego.”⁴ “*It is meant,*” as Soren Kierkegaard said, “*to not change God, but CHANGE us.*”⁵

Lutheran Pastor, Richard Lischer, tells of a child in his church, an 8th grade student named Amy, who was confined to a wheelchair because she had cerebral palsy. “When she was diagnosed at age 4, her illness sparked the most concentrated show of love the community has ever known.” Volunteers from the church, according to doctor’s orders, worked 8 hours a day, 6.5 days per week to try to train her muscles to work together. They manipulated and stretched her neck and limbs, but soon doctors discontinued the procedure, and Amy was left to spend her days in her chair. But then one day, Amy heard that a famous evangelist and faith healer was coming to town. She came to Lischer to talk about it. Both knew that the evangelist’s healing services featured piles of discarded crutches, canes, braces, and wheelchairs. It was clear to Lischer that Amy was “going for the cure”, and he debated what to say. Should he express his doubts? Should he puncture her childish trust?” (pause) “The next time I saw Amy,” Lischer writes, “she was still in her wheelchair, but cheerful as ever.” “I had worried that going for the cure would leave her disillusioned and bitter” ... “But then, I thought, the act of trusting the prayers of the Church, in this case, the Christians in that arena, is itself a replenishing activity, like loving, or farming, or writing. Trusting makes for greater trust, not disillusionment or timidity. I learned this from watching Amy, from seeing her smile. I noticed also a change in Amy. She seemed more prepared to think about her future in a wheelchair and to get on with it. She became more vocal about her condition and more assertive. She told us her dad shouldn’t have to carry her up the steps, and then she petitioned the Trustees for a ramp. She announced plans to become a counselor, and by the time she was in her first year of high school had already found a college with the program she wanted.”⁶

Friends, this experience affirmed for Lischer that, despite the fact...that none of us knows enough about the mysterious ways of God to claim absolutely that God delivered on a particular

⁴Huston Smith. “*Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief.*” (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 45.

⁵ Soren Kuerjegaard. https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/soren_kierkegaard_107355 (accessed 10/12/18).

⁶ Richard Lischer. “*Open Secrets: A Memoir of Faith & Discovery.*” (New York: Random House; 2001),

request, nor do we know enough, to discount or challenge others who believe their prayers have been very specifically answered, despite this, we can believe that prayers are answered for they are always channels through which the Messiah's creative love works, and CHANGE always, powerfully happens. God is never blind, or deaf or oblivious to our prayers. When done in community, our prayers are especially effective. They are effective, brothers and sisters, because they're offered in the context of being God's people together, people who are *endowed with God's gifts, forgiven and empowered by the implanted word of promise in Christ Jesus*⁷...of Jesus in our midst."

Let us pray....

Precious Messiah, Be here with us, healing the sick and easing the pain of the suffering and forgiving our sins ... Be here, shielding us from obstacles which threaten, from doubt and fears which paralyze...Be here, strengthening us to share your love to each other, and with each other to share it outside these walls...Be here, changing us as you move in our midst. Living Lord, be before us, between us, behind us, beside us as we go... Be with us when we lie down...and when we arise...Make us be your brilliant light in the realm. Amen.

⁷ James Boyce