

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: James 5:13-20

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.

¹⁹ My brothers and sisters,[a] 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[b] soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

A visiting farmer stopped at a city restaurant to eat lunch. When he was served his food he bowed his head and gave thanks to the Lord. Some teenagers sitting at a nearby table noticed the farmer's prayer and shouted, "Hey, pops, back where you come from does everybody pray before they eat?"

Their laughter was silenced when the unmoved farmer answered, "No, the hogs don't."

The scripture that was read for us this morning addresses the topic of prayer, but also healing and faith. In his letter to a group of Christians outside of Palestine, James calls for prayer when people are suffering, cheerful and sick, promising that "the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (v. 16). James is convinced that prayer can have a significant effect on our brain, body, heart and sou;—in bad times and good. And today, medical researchers are finally agreeing with him.

One way that medical researchers are recognizing that prayer directly affects health through the brain is by reducing stress. Stress kicks off the body's fight-or-flight response, which is helpful if you're being chased by a bear. But even low levels of chronic stress, which is common in modern life, are detrimental to the immune system. However, prayer activates the half of the nervous system that is the opposite of the fight-or-flight reflex. Harvard doctor Herbert Benson calls it the body's relaxation response. By stimulating the relaxation response, we reduce stress and allow the immune system to recover. This along with other health benefits is getting recognition by doctors.

This text in James is foundational to the use of anointing in the Church of the Brethren. The power of the anointing service is not found in the oil placed on the forehead or the ritual itself, but in faith and the effectiveness of prayer. Throughout the bible we find many examples of anointing but not necessarily for physical healing. In the Old Testament leaders such as kings and priests were anointed for special tasks. People were anointed for comfort and strength. It was used in the cleansing ritual for lepers. Even objects in the tabernacle were anointed for use.

The Gospel of Mark specifically mentions anointing for healing in chapter 6:12-13. Mark was writing about the mission of the twelve disciples when he wrote this: "They preached with joyful urgency that life can be radically different; right and left they sent the demons packing, they brought wellness to the sick, anointing their bodies, healing their spirits."

I have anointed people for healing before they had surgery or other medical procedures. Many of those anointed prior to surgery feel a great sense of peace as they await and prepare for their surgery. I have anointed people asking God for help as they struggled with depression. People come to me for anointing when they are going through a very difficult situation occurring in their lives, when they are struggling with grief over the loss of a loved one or with feelings of grief associated with changing circumstances in their lives.

I anointed a colleague as a form of blessing because he was leaving a congregation to begin a new ministry in another congregation. I've done the same for individuals who have gone off to seminary and to work projects. All anointings embody the power of prayer.

The portion of this text that catches the attention of most people is the first part of verse 15 where it says, "The prayer of faith will save the sick." People sometimes read this and think that if they or a loved one gets sick and if they really believe God will heal them and if they pray a lot for healing, then healing the way they expect it to come will happen and, indeed, sometimes it does. But when it does not happen, we may incorrectly assume someone did not have enough faith or they failed at praying fervently or that God just doesn't care.

When my sister-in-law, Deb, got breast cancer, she was only 38 years old. She and my brother were enjoying life with their two young daughters when she got the diagnosis. From the start, I believed she would be healed. Why? Because I knew at least six women in the congregation where I was serving who were treated for breast cancer when they were young and were still alive ten, twenty, even thirty years later, so I believed Deb's prognosis was good.

Deb had surgery and chemotherapy. All along the way there were many people, including me, praying for her. When she completed her chemotherapy, she was told everything looked good and she appeared to be cancer-free, and she would begin radiation treatments in three weeks. On a Friday, the week before she was supposed to begin the radiation treatments, she was rushed to the hospital and by Sunday she was gone. The doctors did not realize that the cancer had gone to her liver.

This was devastating. How did the doctors miss this? Why did this happen? It didn't seem fair. She was a good Christian woman with a husband, who happens to be my brother, and together they had two lovely little girls. We had faith and we prayed for her healing. What went wrong? Why do some people get healed and others don't? Why do some good people die and some horrible people seem to be miraculously healed?

James doesn't answer questions like these for us; but notice, that he also does not give details for what healing looks like either. Healing comes in many different forms. It may come as our desired preference of healing to our body, mind or spirit. Or, it may simply come as providing us with peace of mind and a change of outlook on our lives. It may come as courage and strength to overcome the darkness that pulls us into feelings of hopelessness and depression that our illness or difficult situation in life may create. And, yes, at some point in all of our lives, whether we are young or old, death provides the ultimate healing.

When evangelist Tony Campolo was in a church in Oregon, he prayed for a man who had cancer. In the middle of the week, he received a telephone call from the man's wife. She said, "You prayed for my husband. He had cancer."

I said, "Had?" Whoa, Tony thought, it's happened.

She said, "He died." Campolo felt terrible.

"Don't feel bad," the woman said. "When he came into church that Sunday, he was filled with anger. He knew he was going to be dead in a short period of time, and he hated God. He was fifty-eight years old, and he wanted to see his children and grandchildren grow up."

He was angry that this all-powerful God didn't take away his sickness and heal him. He would lie in bed and curse God. The more his anger grew towards God, the more miserable he was to everybody around him. It was an awful thing to be in his presence.

After you prayed for him, a peace came over him and a joy came into him. The last three days have been the best days of our lives. We've sung. We've laughed. We've read scripture. We've prayed. Oh, they've been wonderful days. And I called to thank you for laying your hands on him and praying for healing."

Then she said something incredibly profound: "He wasn't cured, but he was healed."

"He wasn't cured, but he was healed." *Sometimes God answers our prayers for healing rather than a cure.*

Throughout the book of James, including the verses found here in 5:13-20, he discusses faith. The assumption is often made that the faith of the person seeking healing is what will lead to the results sought after. However, what James teaches us is that "the prayer offered in faith" does not refer solely to the faith of the sick person, but also to the faith of the people praying. James reminds us that people in a church or in a Christian group are not alone. We are all members of Christ's body and the members of Christ's body should be able to count on one another for support and prayer, especially when they are sick or suffering. It is the faith of the community in prayer that our God responds to with healing for our brother or sister in Christ.

On Christmas morning 1998, Russ Robinson and his family climbed into their motor home and headed from Chicago to Phoenix, Arizona. Russ and his wife took turns driving all day and into the night. While cruising along in the darkness, the headlights suddenly revealed a woman dressed in black, walking in the middle of the road. Russ swerved, but it was too late. The motor home crashed into the woman. Her head hit the windshield, and her body smashed into the right side of the vehicle, tossing her into the ditch.

The woman, who was trying to commit suicide, survived. But Russ was devastated. He phoned a friend in his small group. His wife called someone in her group. The two groups gathered to pray for Russ. He writes: "Their prayer support helped me begin the road to emotional recovery. My community listened during long conversations while I tried to process confusing emotions. When I wrestled with God – seeking to make sense of the experience – people offered reassurance and other help. *I needed people to pray with and for me, and I came to know what it was to have someone "with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). I experienced how the body of Christ can extend real, personal hands to someone in pain.*"

There is power in prayer. Our prayers for each other, even when we do not know what is going on in one another's lives, make a huge difference in the lives of others. Whenever I go to anoint someone, I always try to remember to remind the one being anointed, that I am merely a representative of the larger family of God and that there are many others who are with me in prayer for their healing. When we walk with Jesus, we are bound together and we never need to face illness or troubles alone. Just knowing that others are praying for us provides a portion of the healing we need. Comfort and strength are found in knowing that we are not alone.

James offers guiding words for the person seeking healing; and that is, that the person should confess their sin. Their confession should be offered to God, of course, but James also calls the person in need of healing to accountability by confessing their sin to others, especially to those who were wronged by the person in need. Whenever I anoint someone, I give them an opportunity to make a confession.

This may sound sort of like a bribe: "if you do this...I (meaning God) will heal you"; but that's not what is being said here. You see, our sin can get in the way of our being open to God's

healing. If we are angry with someone (maybe even God), holding a grudge, having trouble forgiving ourselves for something we did, any kind of sin that we hold onto because of our pride or feeling of being justified for what we did or thought, gets in the way of our receiving the healing God wants to give us. Let's face it, our sin separates us from God; and when we hold on to that sin, we are in no condition to be healed.

During the traditional Church of the Brethren anointing service, we are reminded of the need for confession and forgiveness to open ourselves to receiving the gift of healing from God, however it may come. As the oil is put on the forehead of the one being anointed, we pray for the forgiveness of sin, as well as, for the strengthening of faith and for healing and wholeness of body, mind and spirit according to God's grace and wisdom.

In verse 16, James tells us most powerful resource for healing is communion with God through prayer. The effects of this bond with God through prayer can surprise us because the outcomes can be greater than anything we imagined. Too often prayer is turned to as a last resort to be tried when all else fails. We should turn to prayer first because God is greater than any other resource we can think of to help us. God loves us. God promises to be with us. God hears us and will take care of us.

If we know the greatness and the promises and the power of God, why wouldn't we turn to him in prayer first? That's a question we may all need to ponder. What we find when we answer that question may lead us to confession and a closer healthier walk with God and to the healing and wholeness we all seek. Amen.

This morning, I want to offer anointing to anyone who may feel the need for healing in their lives. It may be for physical healing, not necessarily for an ailment or physical challenge that threatens your life, although it could be the case. You may be dealing with brokenness of relationships in your lives with family or friends. You may struggle with feelings of anger that continually challenge you to feel free of emotional pain. You may be seeking God's guidance for decisions you need to make. Perhaps, what you desire most is help from God for a closer walk with Jesus. I don't necessarily need to know in these moments what would bring you to be anointed—a moment of confession to God is all you may need to offer as you come forward. I will anoint you for the forgiveness of sin, the strengthening of faith, and for healing and wholeness. We will do this during the closing hymn. If we need to repeat some verses or if Burt needs to continue playing something so that everyone who comes forward can be anointed, that's okay. Afterwards, we will take a few moments of silence for prayer, and I will close with prayer. Let us enter this time now with prayerful hearts.