

November 17, 2019
James 5:13-16
“Interceding in Prayer”



When he was four years old, his mother felt a lump on his leg while on vacation. Doctor consultations followed when they returned home. Treatment ensued for the rarest of cancers. A few years later, another lump appeared, his leg was amputated. A few years later masses were found across all his body. When doctors gave no hope only morphine, she looked everywhere, anywhere for any chances. Her church formed a prayer circle; she visited faith-healers who promised a miracle. She continued carrying her son into his elementary school classroom, certain future years of education stretched before him. Her son, the fruit of her womb, died in her exhausted arms one night three days before his ninth birthday. Another woman in her church told this grieving mother that she must not have prayed hard enough, or that her faith wasn't strong enough, or that her sins must be too great, otherwise her prayers would have been heard and answered. The woman reminded the young mother, “It says that in the Bible.”

Indeed it does. James five reads, “the prayer of faith will save the sick, the Lord will raise them up ..pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” That is what it says in the Bible.

The problem is every single one of us knows someone who died too young, someone who died in a way that was painful and unfair, someone who died despite the prayers of family, friends, doctors, nurses and entire church communities begging for life. The problem is people have been praying for shelter, food and water, yet famine and drought still leaves bare skeletons in the sun to bake. The problem is people have been praying for world peace, for creation care, for justice and equality, for healing of society ills for a long, long time, and still the wounded world is before us. Either James got this one wrong, or there's not one faithful soul in all the world who can utter an effective prayer.

Except. We know of prayed for rain that did revive parched soil and prayerful acts of care that have made a difference. We know of people who have been cured. We know of prayed for cancers that have disappeared unexpectedly and inexplicably. My seminary friend I told you about last week who asked for prayers went for the biopsy of the spot on her spine where cancer had returned. This week she traveled to MD Anderson hospital, she was prepped for the procedure with IVs in place watching the clock in hospital booties and gown. The surgeon came in and said the operation was cancelled. Scans from that morning did not show a spot to biopsy. He was bewildered; she was rejoicing. We know of times of prayerful forgiveness and reconciliation and healing.

Sometimes people are healed, and it is wonderful. Sometimes they do not get any better, and it is hard. Even when you have resurrection hope, even when you have faith, even when you're trying your best to pray your sorrows into healing, sometimes there is return to health; sometimes there's not. So maybe we'd best just strike this verse in all its certainty from the Bible. At the least, we could add an exclusion, like they do on commercials when the announcer comes in at the end and talks really fast to identify all the exceptions to the warranty. We could put an asterisk beside the verse with a footnote that reads, “sometime” in it.

This praying for one another is what we call intercessory prayer. Intervening by praying on behalf of another is what we do; it is part of who we are as a faith community. We demonstrate this kind of prayer every Sunday, we name aloud the prayers of our hurting world. We light candles to bring those sorrows into the light of Christ. I would maintain that intercessory prayer does not ‘sometimes work’, it always “works” *for its ultimate goal whether or not physical healing and wholeness is restored.*

Last week I spoke of ‘discursive prayer,’ which is prayer without words, prayer that is simply being and holding images, names, situations in heart. Allowing our soul to sigh when words fall short knowing God knows. Maybe we should adapt that for our intercessory prayer also. Humbly naming that we don’t really know what to pray for another. We know what we want to happen; we want healing for our loved ones. We think getting the right job would be the answer to the problem. We think this or that is what we need to pray for, but maybe we need to try praying without words as intercessory prayer as well. Intercessory prayer may be simply holding the person, place, situation in our hearts and opening our hearts to God trusting goodness to prevail, trusting God to be in the midst of the situation. Praying honest in our desire, but ultimately releasing our prayers into God’s care to be with the person in whatever path unfolds for them.

Interceding in prayer is not trying to control God, or manipulate God to agree with us, get on our side, or give us what we want. Intercessory prayer is opening of our heart and acknowledging that God is with us. It is knowing that God knows our desires and pains and the fullness of all things. If we are ultimately praying for Divine presence in the midst of circumstances of life, then our prayers are always answered already, for God is there.

Intercessory prayer allows us to orient ourselves to the needs of others. In that way too, our prayer always works. Prayer of the community shapes the kind of community of people who are committed to each other. We pray together in sickness and in health. We pray together for better or for worse. We pray together in honest confession of our brokenness and in honest desire of forgiveness and wholeness.

Praying for others works by making us aware of others. Intercessory prayer becomes our practice of bringing people to God, holding people up in the light of God in the eye of our imagination. Praying for others is bathing them in healing energy and love- to bring relief in whatever form that may take, to bring restoration in whatever form that may take to be restored to unity in the Divine, to bring wholeness in whatever form that may take. That is risky prayer.

If we are reminded of the indwelling God as near to us as our own heartbeat, the Indwelling God whose breath of life we share, then to pray for another is to bring the other into our innermost being. When I bring the other into the Holy Presence within I may genuinely feel their pains and their struggles, their cries and sighs and heartaches. It is when we are able to hold the other, the messy, broken other, in our hearts that we know compassion, meaning to suffer with. And when we suffer with the other, we find the divine love which holds the whole of humanity and creation in the compassionate embrace of healing love. In that union, we become transformed beings, we become bearers of one another and true images of God.

The Letter of James didn’t get it wrong afteralll, for he wrote, “pray for one another so that YOU may be healed.” If we pray holding the wounds and wounded in our hearts,

all the cancers will not be cured, all the ills will not dissolve, all the world's problems will not magically be righted.

What will happen is, WE will be healed of our divisions; we will let go of our bickering because we will know that we are one in God. When we know that, we know that we are not alone in our misery then we will be the body of Christ in the world today. Those we hold in our heart- and our own hearts- will be transformed by God's grace.

May it be so