

Reflection
Sept. 29, 2024
James 5: 13-20
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Title: Prayer changes things – don't ask me how.

Prayer: God, you made us by love, in love and for love. Help us remember that. Amen.

Are you suffering? Why don't you go ahead and pray? Cheerful? Yeah, pray for that too. Sick? Ask the church elders to anoint you. Oh, and pray.

On the surface, today's passage can feel a bit simplistic. Read quickly we might think that what James is saying is that prayer fixes everything. But, we know it doesn't – at least we have all had experiences where we feel our prayers have not been answered. A situation has not been fixed. We have not been made well.

As with most scripture, this passage is not that simple. It's not about turning to prayer to fix things. This passage is about putting God front and centre in our own lives and the life of the community. It's about trusting in God no matter what is happening in our lives.

A faith so deep that regardless of whether we are suffering or cheerful; sick or sinning – our focus is on God. On a God we believe to be generous and trustworthy; a God who will meet us in our pain. This God will offer us new life – it just might not look at all like what we imagined; and it certainly won't be on our timeline, might not even be in our lifetime.

In the Dalai Lama's reflections on the letter of James, he talks about the Buddhist contemplation of the transient nature of life. He says James even alludes to it in chapter 4 (14) "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."

The idea is that life is transient. We are wrong if we assume we have permanence; that our lives will go on indefinitely. That there is no rush because there's always tomorrow. When we think this way we end up focusing on ourselves too much – on our own self-serving – desires because we believe we have all the time in the world to meet our desires. And when we assume we have all the time in the world we stop paying attention to how our behaviours may impact others because, well, there's always tomorrow.

In this final portion of the letter, James is talking to us about community. We are not moving through this world alone. We are not in relationship with God alone. Our suffering does not only impact ourselves; just like our cheerfulness is not only contained to our one life.

Whether we like it or not, we live in community. Communities we choose, and communities we don't. We are in communion with all of creation.

So, when James says "confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed" he means a holistic healing – a healing so deep that it doesn't show up as little Jimmy who's cold got better. No, it shows up as all of creation being able to take one baby step together – where all is healed; all suffering alleviated; all is cheerful.

And, as we know, this healing, this end of suffering, this cheerfulness does not happen fully in our life time. "We are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."

When we can grasp this concept we do things like plant a seed that will grow into a tree that will provide shade for someone unknown to us 20 years from now.

When this concept is too big for us to grasp then we shrink our world view and focus only on ourselves, making ourselves happy, and taking what we can to satisfy ourselves.

Earlier in the letter, James also talks about how we need to be quick to listen and slow to speak (1:19)

In prayer we listen for God. And we open our hearts to accept whatever God is going to say.

In community we listen for each other. We open our hearts to make space for God among us. To see each other as God's beloved as we "confess our sins to one another and pray for one another."

As we have talked in other Sundays, the sins we carry are human, they are part of the human experience. We are not God and so we are going to sin. It's as simple as that.

We're going to close our hearts off, we're going to judge others to try to make ourselves feel better; we're going to shut our eyes to the suffering of others because it hurts too much; we're going to gravitate towards people who are like us probably a little more often than we should; we're going to bitch about someone and praise God with the same mouth ... there are all sorts of very natural ways we sin everyday. And, keeping all these things bottled up so that we appear 'perfect' to everyone else is in itself a sin.

Confessing our sins with each other is having a conversation; it's exploring what's going on and seeing if we are off track or on track. It's realizing how we might have been going about something the wrong way and then learning how to try it in a new way.

I saw a musical at the York Theatre in 2019 and it has stayed with me. It is called Children of God and is coming back to the Cultch March 21 – 29 next year. PLEASE go see it. It is a powerful production and at its core is resilience and the power of the human spirit. Written and directed by Corey Payette, it is the story of an Oji-Cree family whose children were taken away to residential school in Northern Ontario. Rita, is the Mum who kept showing up but was never allowed inside to see her kids. And, Julia and Tom are her kids who were never told she came.

It's been five years and I can still picture scenes from it; and still feel the emotions it evoked.

Anyway, on the night I went there was a talk back, so I stayed.

The young Indigenous woman leading the conversation talked for a while before it was opened up for questions. Among other things she shared some personal stories about intergenerational trauma. When it was time to ask questions, it took a while, but eventually someone got up and asked "what can I do now? It was my ancestors, not me."

The first thing that came to my head and heart was pray. You can pray. We can all pray. Pray everyday. Don't stop praying.

And then I thought, if there is intergenerational trauma why can't there be intergenerational repentance?

I can repent on behalf of my ancestors. And I can also repent for myself. For all the assumptions I hang on to, for my laziness in taking action, for clarity and reminders of how my heritage has benefitted me; I can repent for the skill I have in avoiding seeing other people's pain. I can repent for a lot in prayer. And, I can pray for repentance for those who came before me – those from whom I come.

The definition of repentance is to change our ways. So, if we are repenting in prayer for ourselves and previous generations then it means there is a chance for change. The way we live will change, what we notice will change, how we respond to injustice will change.

This kind of prayer is not passive, nor is it immediate.

And this kind of prayer is not waiting for the world to change; it is changing us.

The change starts in each of our individual hearts, not somewhere outside of us.

This kind of prayer is full time work – all day every day. And, so be it. How are we going to move forward if we remain passive?

"Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another."

Tomorrow is Orange Shirt Day AND National Day of Truth and Reconciliation. Sept. 30 is not a holiday but a day to reflect on, to honour and to bear witness to the journey of residential school

survivors, their families and communities. And, to remember those who never returned home from school.

In Moderator Carmen Lansdowne's message she talks about the need not only for reconciliation but for turning things around and making them right. She says "every member of the United Church of Canada is accountable for learning about the tragic and painful legacy of the institution (between 1925 and 1969 the UCC operated 15 residential schools) and how it continues to impact the lives of Indigenous peoples across the country."

In response to the Letter of James, the Dalai Lama also says "never forget the fundamental equality of all human beings." We all have a right to the fundamental qualities of goodness, which exist naturally in all of us irrespective of our gender, race, social and religious backgrounds.

And James is presenting this to us with a vision of a caring community – a community filled with prayer, singing, a ministry of presence, healing hands and anointing.

I teased in the Minister Musing on Friday that we would explore the practice of prayer and the power of prayer. It hasn't been a step one, step two kind of way, but I feel like we have explored prayer. Prayer is about more than us, prayer happens on a timeline unbeknownst to us, prayer is a conversation with God, prayer is communal, prayer changes us, prayer is active not passive, and we could pray all the time and still only scratch the surface of our growth.

C. S. Lewis has a very fitting quotation about prayer with which to close. He says: I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me.

Amen.