

“Finding Peace...In Prayer”
James 5:13-20
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September 30, 2018 Chapel & Sanctuary Worship Services

Today we come to the end of our month-long exploration of the biblical idea of peace. For the past four weeks, Tom has taken us along a journey through the Bible, and through past, present, and future to help us understand and to find peace. Meanwhile, on Wednesdays, Kirk Neely has been leading a series on prayer. That series continues this Wednesday and next. And the today's lectionary reading from James is all about the peace we find in and through prayer. So while I don't know that I can add to what Tom and Kirk have already said about peace and prayer respectively, I do think there is an important connection to be made between them.

But before I do, I have to deal with a couple of the difficult parts of this text. Much of this text is easy and wonderful. If you're suffering, you should pray. If those in the community are suffering, the community should come together to pray for them. We should confess our sins and find forgiveness together. We should bring back people who have wandered from the ways of faith. All of that is great and easy to understand, and what a beautiful image that is of what Christian community can look like at it's very best.

But right in the middle of all of that, we read that, “The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.” And in the next verse, “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” And those two lines have been the source of so much angst and misunderstanding among the faithful.

There is classic example of the two sports teams that both pray together in the locker room that they might be the winners. But one of those teams has to lose. So, based on these lines from James, is that game a contest of their skill or is it a contest of their faith and righteousness. But we all know that it goes deeper than that silly example. We pray, and we pray, and we pray, and sometimes the nightmare still comes. And we read texts like these and wonder, were we not righteous enough? Did we not have enough faith to move that mountain?

But we all know, that's not how this all works, don't we? God is not some cosmic vending machine that spits out whatever we want if we just put in the right prayers and punch the right buttons. And thank God for that! I don't have the answer to why someone gets better and someone else doesn't. But I know that I'm thankful that the course of the universe isn't governed by the whims of my prayer life, or yours, or anyone else's.

So what do we do with those texts, and this beautiful picture of Christian community that surrounds it. I think there is still a way that we can say with James that prayer is truly powerful and effective, and even that the prayers of the righteous can save, without turning God into that cosmic vending machine.

So here are six ways we can find peace in prayer – ways that I have the saving power and efficacy that James describes without turning God into a cosmic vending machine.

1. Prayer gives us...The peace of letting go. Prayer reminds us that we are not in control but are dependent on God. Prayer also reminds us that God is both sovereign and good. Often it is within our prayers that we realize those truths most fully. And as much as most of us generally like being in control, there is peace that comes with relinquishing that sense of control. I remember when I was in school, there was a feeling of peace I found when I turned in a big paper. Up until that moment, I was the one in control of what I studied and what I wrote. But once I turned it in, I had no more control, and there was this sense of relief. Nothing I could do

after that point could earn me an A or an F. So I would walk away with a smile, knowing I had done my best and after that, it just wasn't up to me.

Have you ever been in the passenger seat of a car when the driver asks you to hold the wheel while he or she does something. There you are with your left arm stretched out across the vehicle, trying to keep the wheel steady. You can turn the wheel a little with that outstretched hand, but a hard turn would be nearly impossible, and you have no control of the gas or the brakes. And the perspective is different on the other side of the car. So it's sometimes even hard to figure out exactly where you are in the. I don't know about you, but for me, it's a relief to hand that control back to person in the driver seat.

The good news is that the God who is in control of our lives and the universe is wise and good and powerful – just who we want to be in control. It's like trusting your surgeon before you get knocked out for surgery. You put yourself in the hands of those who know what they are doing and have your best interests in mind. And how much more so is that the case with God?!

When we pray, we don't manipulate God. Quite the opposite! We give up our worries, our fears, our sufferings, our anger, our guilt, and our grudges to the loving and powerful God, so that we no longer have to bear those ourselves – so that we can be at peace.

The biblical words for faith include the idea of trust. So perhaps the prayer of the faithful that James talks about is a prayer that says, "Lord, we place this in your hands and trust in your love and your power." And let me tell you, that prayer is indeed powerful and effective, and the trust that such a prayer requires and the trust that it builds is indeed the trust that saves us all.

2. Prayer gives us...The peace of an altered perspective. How often have you turned to God in prayer for others, and suddenly realized that your worries are often so petty. This happens to me all the time. I pray for those flooded out by the hurricane; I pray for those touched by a school shooting; I pray for those whose whole life is held in a garbage bag slung over their shoulders and who don't know where they will sleep or eat, and suddenly my first-world problems shrink in comparison. Suddenly I realize that I am blessed beyond measure. And even when our problems really are big, prayer for others knocks us off our pedestal at the center of our universe and reminds us there is more to this world than on current distress. And that too can bring peace. Sometimes all that we need is a few minutes to think about something other than our current problems – to think about someone other than ourselves. When we are stressed out to the max and can't see past the present crisis right that is in front of us, blocking our vision and paralyzing us, sometimes just looking around and praying for the world around us, gives us the break and the shift in perspective we need to find peace.

3. Prayer gives us...The peace of slowing down. We live in such a fast-paced world today. And I don't know about you, but when I get really busy and stressed out, often my prayer life is what suffers the most. Face it, it takes time to pray, and sometimes that's time we just don't think we can spare. But the practice of prayer is often just what we need at times like that. There are times when I have to make myself stop and pray, and it makes all the difference in the world.

One practice of prayer I find particularly useful are breath prayers. For those who aren't familiar with this practice, breath prayers are short, two-line prayers that can be repeated through the day. One line is said (silently) as you inhale, and the second line is said as you exhale. The classic example is sometimes just called "The Jesus Prayer." I use that one a lot! It goes like this:

[inhale] “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior” [exhales] “have mercy on me, a sinner.”

I like that one, not only because of the way that it reminds me of who Jesus is, who I am before Jesus, but also because, if I say it at a comfortable pace, it really causes me to slow down my breathing. I use that one often when worries keep me up at night, to find peace and perspective.

You can also use words of scripture:

[inhale] “Jesus, remember me” [exhale] “when you come into your kingdom.”

The trick is to find one that can draw you in, and is of the right length so that you can do it within one long, slow breath. If you tried to do “Jesus wept”, for instance, you are likely to hyperventilate, and if you choose one of the Apostle Paul’s long sentences, you might pass out before finishing a complete breath! The Psalms are great for breath prayers, because Hebrew poetry is usually made up of pairs of lines just the right length for breath prayers.

[inhale] “Bless the Lord, O my soul” [exhale] “and all that is within me bless Gods holy name”

Two lines from a hymn can also make a great breath prayer. Once I use often is:

[inhale] “Spirit of the living God,” [exhale] “fall afresh on me”

The original idea behind breath prayers was to be able to say them over and over again all day as a way of continual prayer. I have never been able to do that, but the practice has seen me through many-a rough day or night.

But however you pray, let it slow you down so that in that stillness and quiet, you find peace. Maybe what it takes is not words it all, but a walk in nature, or sitting and listening to a waterfall or the rain. Maybe what it takes is just a time to listen for God. That too can be prayer that gives us peace.

4. Prayer gives us...The peace of mutual understanding and forgiveness. Often it is our relationships that trouble us most. I remember in my church in Tennessee, there was a particular person who just seemed to make everything I tried to do harder. We saw many things differently, and she wasn’t always kind in the way that she disagreed with me. I harbored so much anger toward her that it kept me up at night stewing over the latest conversation we had had. I would stand in the shower in the next morning thinking of what I wish I had said back to her.

You know what gave me peace in the midst of that? Praying for her! Not praying that she would see things my way, or that she would just go away – those would be prayers for me, not for her. No, I prayed for her – for her wellbeing, for her success in her ministries at the church. I began to thank God for her dedication to the church and for all the hours of lay ministry that she put in at the church and in the community. And while she was never my best buddy, I came to appreciate her and to understand her better, and it became easier to look past her sometimes gruff and forceful approach, because I knew the concern for the church and for God’s people that was behind all of that passion. Those prayers for her changed my whole outlook on ministry and how I handle those who cause me the most trouble.

You know, it's hard to hate someone when you are thanking God for them. It's hard to be angry at someone when you are praying for their needs and their wellbeing. And it's also easier to forgive them. And that can also bring great peace!

5. Prayer gives us...The peace of walking with God. One interpretation I have heard for the verse from James that reads "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." (James 5:16) is that the reason the prayer of the righteous is more powerful and effective is that the righteous have better aligned their wills with God's wills. So if they are praying for what God already wants, it'll happen. Now I'll tell you that I don't find that interpretation completely satisfying, but there is at least a grain of truth in that. After Pentecost, when Peter and other apostles were arrested, a member of the Jewish council and a respected teacher whose students included none other than the Apostle Paul, stood up and said:

"Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men.³⁶ For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared.³⁷ After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered.³⁸ So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail;³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!"
Acts 5:35-39 (NRSV)

There is a double peace that comes from prayer that seeks to discern and align ourselves with the will of God, rather than trying to impose our wills upon God, as if we could even do that! There is the peace that comes from knowing that God's will cannot be thwarted, no matter how bad we mess things up. The second part of that double peace is that, even though God may lead us along difficult paths, but if they are God's ways, then we can be sure that God walks with us along that same difficult path. And that awareness of the presence of God can be the very thing that brings us the most peace, even amid hardship and adversity.

6. Prayer gives us...The peace of finding community. That's really what this passage from James is most about, anyway, isn't it? Prayer in these closing verses of James is not just an individual activity. James says that it is the prayer of the community that is powerful and effective. Community prayer brings solidarity among those praying and solidarity with those for whom prayers are offered. When the church seriously prays together for someone facing difficulties, think about how often those prayers are accompanied by cards sent and meals delivered. When the church gathers and earnestly prays for missions outside her walls, how often is it that those prayers are followed by volunteers from the church working in that mission and by money given to it? Whether or not prayer changes God's mind on how to handle any particular situation, the prayers of the community can change the situation drastically, by mobilizing the community to work toward what it prays for.

And there is also peace in that solidarity. There is peace when the community gathers around and walks alongside people in times of trouble. There is peace between peoples who are different from one another when prayer moves us to work for justice in the world. There is peace when those who have fallen are picked back up by the church rather than ostracized and condemned. There is peace when the outcast is welcomed into the fold. And prayer is so often the vehicle that makes all of those things happen.

Prayer helps us to let go of our worries. Prayer alters and enlarges our perspectives. Prayer slows us down from our frenetic lives. Prayer opens the doors to mutual understanding and forgiveness. Prayer helps us to

walk with God. And prayer binds us together in Christian community. And through all of that, God grants us his peace that passes understanding within the practice prayer. So let us not neglect to pray, and may God grant the we find God in the midst of those prayers.

To God alone be the glory, forever and ever. Amen.