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Date: January 5, 2020
Sermon Title: "Prayer: on the Receiving End"
Scripture: James 5:13-18
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

James 5:13-18

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 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. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. 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. 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. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

My father was a Christian his whole life. He couldn't remember not believing in Christ. He preached his first sermon at age 12, was an active pastor for 66 years. Toward the end of his life, I asked him if he ever had doubts. He said, "I've had doubts, but I never lost my faith. I've always trusted in God."

One of those times of doubt I remember well. It was the mid-1970s, and a childhood friend of mine, Buddy, was dying. He had an asthma attack on his honeymoon and was brought back to Queens in a coma. But he and his family were from our Church; my dad confirmed and married him. But he and I were in Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts and Little League together. My father did what the Bible says to do. He called together the "Elders" of his Church, the spiritual leaders, what we call "Deacons," and they went to Jamaica Hospital, gathered around Buddy's bed, anointed him with oil, and prayed over him to be healed. But he died a couple of days later.

Those three or four days between Buddy's death and the funeral were hard. My father had done everything right. The Bible promised Buddy would be healed. Yet he was doing Buddy's funeral.

My father loved languages, especially Biblical languages; he read the Bible in Hebrew and Greek and Latin, so he put those languages to work. Eventually he concluded that what the Bible said could also mean that with the prayers and the oil, Buddy would be saved. *Saved.*

To be saved is a big deal in the Christian faith, bigger than life or death. To be saved is to be beyond life and death. It is the ultimate triumph. The actual verse is, "The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up . . . he will be forgiven." (James 5:15)

Ah! There's the rub, isn't it? As Christians, as religious people of one type or another, as inheritors of the Old Testament and the New Testament, we are glad to know that our friends and our loved ones and we ourselves will be resurrected; with our sins forgiven, we will go to heaven; and the Bible makes clear that heaven is a place of wellness, of healing, of "no more tears." That's the faithful, believing, spiritual Christian side of ourselves.

So our loved ones die, one by one, my childhood friend Buddy dies, they all go to heaven, they are well and happy and reunited with other loved ones, and all is well with the world. I believe all that. But the human side of ourselves, you and I as people, as feeling, loving people, people with hopes and dreams, people with emotions and "ties that bind," when we pray for someone to be made well, we don't mean heaven, do we? We mean in the here and now.

Last Sunday I introduced this topic of "prayer." We looked at Jesus's "Lord's prayer," a guide, an outline, a sample prayer designed for us to take as a model and personalize it, make it your own. Speak to God personally, directly, specifically, humbly, simply, and regularly, just as Jesus did.

And I talked about the immediate benefits of prayer, the direct results of your putting your concerns, your issues, your needs into words. Whether you say a prayer out loud or quietly to yourself or deep inside your own head, you are still taking what's in your mind and in your heart and forming words, making sentences, developing ideas and themes. That's all to the good.

Quite a few times in my life, someone has said, "David, if I can prove to you that there is no God, would you stop praying?" And I've responded, "No," explaining that the very process of organizing my innermost thoughts and trying to form them into a reasonable appeal is helpful. So the very act of prayer is good from the get-go. By praying, you are honest enough with yourself to know you need some help, whatever form it takes: insight, guidance, a nudge, intervention, full-blown miracle, clarity, confidence. All to the good.

That was last Sunday, the simple part of prayer, our part. Opening ourselves up, reaching out beyond ourselves, putting our thoughts in order, saying what's on our hearts. The tougher part is waiting for an answer, getting an answer, dealing with an answer we didn't want.

Let's be blunt about this. There are people we pray for to live, and they die; to get better, and they don't. We pray for jobs we don't get; good weather, but it rains or snows; relationships and friendships to be restored that aren't. We pray for our kids to make a certain team or get into a certain college. It doesn't happen.

Life is full of reality proving stronger than our prayers. If "The Lord's Prayer" is Jesus's most famous, his second most famous prayer is the one he gave in the Garden of Gethsemane just before he was betrayed, which was just before he was arrested, before he was tried, before he was crucified, before he was dead and buried. And just before he was resurrected.

Jesus, "sweating blood," the Bible says, in agony, maybe fearful, maybe angry, he says, "If it be possible, remove this cup (this cup of suffering, this awful path to the cross), if it be possible, remove this cup from me (stop this travesty, let me live). Nevertheless, not my will but thy will be done."

This too is a model prayer: brutally frank, intensely personal, totally faithful: "Dear God: get me out of this mess. But whatever, I'm with you." Or perhaps a nicer version, one of my most common prayers: "Dear God, here's what I think. But I trust you, no matter what." That means that, like Jesus, we do have our opinions. We know what we want. But an essential part of trust, of faith, is the willingness to believe even in unexpected, unwanted outcomes. *The essential part of trust is the willingness to believe even in unexpected, unwanted outcomes.* It's not easy to trust, especially when life itself, or happiness, or fulfillment is on the line. But that's when trust comes into play the most.

The Bible in general, Christianity within these four walls, religion worldwide, and history long believe in prayer. Very early in the Bible, Genesis 4:26, it says, "At that time people began to call on the name of the Lord." In other words, there was that first moment in human history when people realized, "Hey, I could use a little help here." And they turned to a force beyond themselves.

In my visit to Kathmandu, Nepal, I came across a humongous "prayer wheel," a gigantic cylinder holding thousands of yards of prayers written on thin paper, with long wooden spokes sticking out for worshipers to push the prayer wheel.

Some religions have prayer flags that send prayers into the wind and onto God. Lots of Churches use incense because the Bible tells us that our prayers are like

sweet-smelling incense to God. St. Paul gives two excellent pieces of prayer advice. Number 1, "Pray without ceasing." (1 Thessalonians 5:17) Make prayer as natural to you, as regular as breathing. Don't wait for a crisis. Don't let it become unfamiliar. You text people endlessly, you email people all the time, you take phone calls all day long. Toss God in that mix. "Pray without ceasing." Number 2, open your mouth and trust God to use your mouth, your thoughts, your ideas to construct a useful prayer. Paul wrote, "The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. When we don't know what to say, God's Spirit will intercede for us with groans that words cannot express." In other words, sometimes we are left speechless by life's events. Words do fail us. Don't shut down, Paul says. Don't give up. Open up. Open up your mouth, your mind, your heart. Let God fill that openness.

I'm a very prolific, very amateur writer, but I know my way through "writer's block." You write. You don't wait for "the Muse" to show up. You don't wait for lightning to strike. You sit down. You take out a piece of paper. You put a pen in your hand. You write. Yes, you'll stumble along. You'll cross out. You'll toss out whole pages, chapters. That's O.K. You get more paper. Another pen. You write.

God has words ready to pour out of you, on paper or in prayer. Trust God. But so far I've avoided the tough part: dealing with God's answer; or recognizing God's answer; or accepting God's answer; or not getting an answer at all. There are glib explanations for God's unsatisfying responses to our prayer.

The Muslim world says about everything, "Inshallah," "God willing." Muslims and Christian fundamentalists are in agreement: everything that happens, God did it, allowed it. Knew it, orchestrated it.

A more secular parallel is "Everything happens for a reason." A more popular, religious motto is, "Let go and let God." In other words, stop overthinking, analyzing. God is in control. It all works out in the end.

All these rationales have verses to back them up, doctrines and theologies to support them, religious leaders to endorse them. Prayer is such a mystery . . . and a wonder . . . that I'm not putting any of that down. To quote an old song, "Whatever gets you through the night, it's all right, it's all right."

If you think God gave you a tragedy because God knew you could handle it, and that your way of dealing with it would help others, I'm not taking that away from you. In the privacy of my own heart, I can know that God doesn't act that way, God doesn't give one person cancer and another person a car crash and another some other calamity. But if that idea helps you through it, I'm not arguing you out of it.

I'm much more inclined that God searches for you in a calamity, God finds you, God accompanies you through it to the end. And sometimes the end is heaven. And sometimes the end is recovery. And sometimes there are hard times in between: suffering, uncertainty, treatment, disappointment. But together, with God, there can be glory, victory, joy in the way that surprises us all. Which ultimately is what faith is about: believing in surprises hidden even in disappointment.

In prepping for the sermon, I Googled "unanswered prayers." There were two types of categories. One category is from God's perspective. It's all good. You need to get your prayer aligned with God. It's not all about you. And either you're not fit to ask for anything OR you're not believing strongly enough OR you're not submitting to God's will.

The other category was funnier, devoted to a Garth Brooks country song called "Unanswered Prayers," a rather catty song, actually. A man goes back to his old high school for a football game, runs into an old girlfriend. He remembered how he prayed so hard to God to give him that girlfriend, promising he'd do whatever God wanted if that girl would just be his. But God didn't answer his prayer. And now, back at his old high school, with a current wife on his arm, meeting the old girlfriend, he's glad God didn't give him what he wanted. The song made me think that maybe God had actually protected the old girlfriend from him!

But it was a reminder of the complex interplay of needs, wants, prayers, God's will, and selfishness. And we expect God to sort it out to our satisfaction. Sometimes our satisfaction isn't good for us.

Here's the bottom line: prayer does work. And mostly, prayer is a work in progress. You enter into it, and the progress begins. When you enter into it, and the progress begins, a big part of that progress is allowing God to work on you. By opening up in praying, God can work on me. New ideas are planted in my head. Or someone talks to me. Or I get a hint, a feeling, a nudge. Fresh words enter my mouth. I have a new prayer in mind. It works.

We are a praying Church. We, meaning me and you. We pray a lot. People come into our sanctuary all week long just to pray. As soon as we added our prayer candle stand, it became immediately popular. People drop by all week long to light a candle, say a prayer. We have a prayer team that accepts any and all prayer requests: little ones, big ones, urgent ones, ongoing or long-standing ones, general or specific, even anonymous. We write prayers at a moment's notice. Someone tells me about a surgery, a hospitalization, a birth or death, or anything in between. At that moment, I'll email out a personal prayer just for that person, that situation.

There's a saying in sports, "Let the ball come to you . . . have soft hands." Prayer is like that. Even in urgency, approach it softly. Leave room for God to get through, change your perspective, help you understand; put words in your mouth; and even have FAITH in unexpected, unimagined outcomes.

Let's stand and join together to sing our final hymn, "Sweet Hour of Prayer," No. 570 in your Hymnal:

*Sweet hour of prayer! Sweet hour of prayer!
That calls me from a world of care,
and bids me at my Father's throne
make all my wants and wishes known.
In seasons of distress and grief,
my soul has often found relief,
and oft escaped the tempter's snare
by thy return, sweet hour of prayer!*

*Sweet hour of prayer! Sweet hour of prayer!
The joys I feel, the bliss I share
of those whose anxious spirits burn
with strong desires for thy return!
With such I hasten to the place
where God my Savior shows his face,
and gladly take my station there,
and wait for thee, sweet hour of prayer!*

*Sweet hour of prayer! Sweet hour of prayer!
Thy wings shall my petition bear
to him whose truth and faithfulness
engage the waiting soul to bless.
And since he bids me seek his face,
believe his word, and trust his grace,
I'll cast on him my every care,
and wait for thee, sweet hour of prayer!*