

Preacher: Ruth Preston Schilk

Date: Sept. 27, 2009

Scripture: James 5:13-16

Sermon: *Prayer: One Size Doesn't Fit All*

If you were asked: “Why do you pray?” How would you answer?

“It gives me a sense of peace.”

“I’m desperate.”

“I was *taught* to pray.”

“I listen and talk to God by praying.”

“It keeps my love affair with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit growing.”

Dr. Charles Stanley, American preacher and author, on a recent radio broadcast told of an occasion when he was stretched out on his prayer mat with his eyes closed, praying out loud. At some point while he was praying, he became aware of a presence beside him. When he opened his eyes, his two year old son was stretched out beside him, “What are you doing, Daddy?” he asked.

What *are* we doing when we pray? That is, **why do** we pray?”

If someone came into the sanctuary who had never experienced the church at prayer before, how would you answer their question, “What are you doing?”

“Why does the **church** pray?” Certainly, some of the same answers about why *individuals* pray would apply to the **church**. Author and Biblical scholar, William Willimon describes one of those common points when he writes:

Prayer is the bold effort to hold God to his promises. In praying, 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,' we pray that God will be true to himself and give us what has been promised. We affirm the faithfulness of God and the confidence in God's ability to enact what has been promised.

We pray because, only God can give what the church most desperately needs. [William H. Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 27]

When Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray on the night of his betrayal, he told his inner circle of friends to “Remain here, and stay awake with me” (Matthew 26:38). If Jesus needed companionship and support from his disciples during **his** suffering, surely we can imitate the action *He* took, calling upon friends to surround us with interceding prayer. Did the disciples pray with or for Jesus when he went off a little farther to pray? No, they were too tired. But what difference *would* it have made?

James in his letter to the churches instructs:

Are any among you suffering? They should pray.

Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.

How is the church to pray? James answers that quite simply: in all circumstances – in good times and hard times, in sorrow and joy. Bring all of this in conversation to God.

Often it is easy to praise God in **prayer** for one another during prayers of the people and to join in **singing** our prayers of praise to God.

However, forming the words to pray for – or even sitting beside – those who **suffer** can be more difficult. Yet, James specifically names suffering – even if suffering is brought to the point of illness – as being essential to pray about for one another.

Mary Etta King, a Mennonite from Lancaster, Pennsylvania reminds us: it's not easy:

Remaining and staying "awake" in difficult situations with those who suffer is...hard! But that is what it means to pray. Praying with people facing all kinds of traumatic situations posed by our world today provides the support they need [Mary Etta King, "What's the point? Why we pray" in *Leader*, (Newton, KS: Mennonite Church), Fall, 2009].

Mary Etta King goes on to recount a friend's journey with breast cancer treatment. Her friend said that "it was the prayers of the people around me that cradled me and brought me to the Son. I had more faith in their faith and in the power of their prayers than I did of my own."

What difference did those prayers make? They brought **her** to Jesus. When James writes instructing the churches to pray for the sick and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord, these ill ones too are meeting the great Physician, but in a different way. By being touched and anointed, perhaps its more like Jesus being brought to them as they experience what someone has coined, the "tangibility of God" through compassionate touch.

Yes, the church is called to pray for its members since it's not uncommon for the sick in heart or soul or body to find one's ability to pray – paralysed. More specifically, *the elders of the church* (by this, James is likely referring to the eldest and most respected Christians in the fellowship) should be summoned for the ministry of intercession and anointing. If a member were dangerously sick and unable to pray, the elders would pray on this person's behalf while the person prayed in their heart.

We are in partnership with our triune God. That's why James says, *the prayer of faith* [or, "the prayer offered in faith"] *will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up*. Our prayers are necessary. Scripture says that they will save/restore the sick, but it is the Lord who will raise them up. But what is this **other** promise given in the same breath? – *and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven*.

At first glance, we might view it as an afterthought tacked on by James. But there is something that comes **before**, as a **preparation** for praying and healing and being forgiven.

When James or anyone else in scripture uses the word "therefore," that is as good as underlining what comes next-- in red magic marker: *Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed*. James concludes his teaching on intercessory praying and healing – with confession of sin – because the confession of sin is necessary preparation for intercessory praying and healing.

Is this news about the importance of confessing our sins **startling**? Is this something that came to mind when I asked "How is the church to pray?"? Is knowing this helping you understand the importance of a prayer of confession within congregational worship?

"For James, the idea is not to point out one's personal flaws, but to highlight the common frailties that we all have that can be healed through confession" [From: Christopher Michael Jones, *The African American Lectionary, 2008*].

Author Calvin Miller lays it out simply when he says, *Confession is but the admission of our helplessness—our need—and the subsequent redemption we find by living with*

Christ. Through Christ, that which we confess beckons the healing of God. When we acknowledge our need to be forgiven by Christ we are ushered into God's grace, and his forgiveness is ours. [Calvin Miller, *The Path of Celtic Prayer*, (Downers Grove, Ill., Intervarsity Press, 2007), p. 135].

Miller goes on to say that “confession doesn’t mean so much that we are informing God of our sins, as it is agreeing with him that we are sinful...Confession is the bold step of putting the fruit down, looking at it with God and agreeing that the fruit has our teeth marks on it. [Miller, pp. 140, 141].

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). “When Adam was actually discovered with the forbidden fruit, obviously gnawed upon, he basically said to God, “It was the woman you gave me that is really guilty.” And Eve says, in effect, “I wouldn’t have done this except the serpent beguiled me.” Nobody steps up to the plate and says “I sinned.” Adam and Eve’s response was passed on to the human race [Miller, pp. 149-150].

“It is said that when George Washington was asked if he really cut down the cherry tree, he began his confession with “I cannot tell a lie.” The story is likely a fable, but it is a pleasant one. If Adam had started out by saying “I cannot tell a lie” and could have passed down *that* tendency to the human race instead of the legacy of rationalization, just think how much better off the world would be!” [Miller, p. 150].

“If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9). As we put down “the gnawed fruit,” we are freed to embrace the Lord with one arm, and with the other-- bring into that union with the Son those for whom we pray – the suffering, the cheerful, and those in need of healing.

So let us “keep awake” as Jesus admonishes, for the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Amen.