

Tracy Daub
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James 5:13-20

CLAIMING THE POWER

A lot of Christians have an ambivalent relationship with prayer. Not *all* Christians. Some Christians are completely at ease with prayer. For some Christians, prayer is as natural as breathing. But I think it is fair to say that a lot of Christians struggle with prayer. Maybe we feel we don't know how to pray, that we don't do it the right way. Even the disciples felt like that. You might remember when the disciples came to Jesus and asked him to teach them how to pray. Even they weren't sure how to do this praying thing. So Jesus taught them the Lord's Prayer.

Perhaps some of our ambivalence toward prayer centers on whether we believe it is truly effective or not. Does prayer really work? We can pray for the end of hunger, poverty, and violence but tomorrow these tragic circumstances will almost certainly still exist.

Prayer can also seem like such a feeble response to the situations of suffering we see around us. In the face of shattering grief or life-threatening illnesses we wish we could do something far more powerful than just pray. And yet, we are not capable of raising the dead, we are not capable of mending the heart that is torn apart with grief, we are not capable of curing cancer. And the one option left open to us—prayer—can seem so feeble.

But the writer of the Letter of James believed strongly in the power of prayer. In the passage we read today, James beckons the early Christians to pray for everything—to pray when they are suffering, to pray with praise in times of joy, to pray for healing when sick, to pray for forgiveness, to pray for each other. And James adds, “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”

Now, it could be easy to misinterpret James and believe that prayer is all he is advocating in the face of human suffering. But when we read the Letter of James in its entirety it becomes clear that James is adamant that Christians put their faith into action. He takes Christians to task for simply professing belief while ignoring the needs of others. And he repeats the belief that “faith without works is dead.” So prayer is not the *only* response James is advocating in the face of human suffering. But it is an important one. And from the earliest days of our faith, Christians have believed in its power.

But what do we mean when we speak of the “power” of prayer? Now we are treading on both difficult as well as mysterious ground. Let’s start by clarifying what the power of prayer is *not*. There are some people who are told that if their faith is deep enough, then their prayers will be answered. And thus, when they or a loved is not cured, when death comes despite their fervent and heartfelt prayers, they are led to believe that *they* failed somehow. Their faith was not strong enough. This notion is nothing short of abusive to sincere people of faith. It is abusive and wrong.

Prayer is also not some tool we use to manipulate God into doing our bidding. God is not under *our* control. And prayer is not something we do to badger a reluctant God into doing something for us. For we believe that God always and forever desires our wellbeing. God does not have to be convinced or bribed to do good to us. God desires to do good for us.

But here is also the mystery of prayer. Prayer eludes our ability to understand it. It cannot be used like a how-to-manual to get what we want. We pray for something but we may receive a very different answer. And we may not even understand or recognize the answer until months or years later.

Fundamentally, prayer is a means of connecting ourselves with God. Any relationship we value in life needs to be nurtured, needs to receive our attention. And so we pray to God. We pray to connect ourselves with the Source of Life and Love.

But how do we do that? What are the best ways of praying that will help us connect with God? What are the right words to say? How should we pray?

Honesty is a good place to start. Any valued relationship includes honesty. Authentic prayer should include honesty about our feelings and our needs and our failures. Sometimes the most authentic prayer we can offer to God in difficult circumstances of our lives is simply a primal scream of anger and pain and abandonment. These primal screams to God are indeed authentic prayer. And we find such prayers throughout the Bible—such as in the Book of Psalms where many of the writers cry out to God in anger and pain and sometimes accused God of abandoning them. We find such prayers uttered by Job in his great suffering when he summoned God to a court trial so Job could declare his innocence. We hear an honest prayer of anger from Jonah who had no hesitation in arguing with God and telling God off. And we find such honest prayer on the lips of Jesus when hanging on the cross he cried to God, “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?” If we believe that our prayers to God should be sincere, then these cries of anguish are as sincere as they come.

But other prayers of ours look quite different. The first Friday of every month UPC offers a contemplative Taize service of prayer and song. I have always appreciated the words we print in the Taize bulletin which precede our five minutes of silence. These words borrowed from the Taize community in France offer this important reminder: “When we try to express communion with God in words, we rapidly reach the end of our capacities, which is why silence is so essential in discovering the heart of prayer. Remaining in silence in God’s presence, open

to the Spirit, is already prayer.” Remaining in silence in God’s presence, open to the Spirit, is already prayer.

That means that prayer does not even have to include words. Sometimes the prayers we pastors give are just so bloomin’ wordy! I know I’ve experienced pastors whose prayers just go on and on, without end! They seem to operate on the philosophy that longer is better. But sometimes longer is not better. Take for example the Lord’s Prayer—which is a rather short prayer. Sometimes simplicity gets to the heart of our prayer better than all the millions of words we could use.

The writer Anne Lamott asserts that there are really just 3 essential prayers: Help. Thanks. And Wow! Those three prayers pretty much say all we need to say to God. And those prayers can be uttered at any time and in any place. Lamott writes that “Churches are good for prayer, but so are garages and cars and mountains and showers and dance floors.” She adds, “Some people think that God is in the details, but I have come to believe that God is in the bathroom.” I imagine that bathroom prayer may be quite familiar to many of us!

So does prayer work? I guess we need to define what we mean by “work.” If by working we mean we get exactly what we asked for, then we are likely to feel rather disillusioned with prayer. But if we approach prayer as a practice that opens us to the healing, loving, steadfast, merciful presence of God, if we approach prayer as an opportunity for God to touch us and change us and draw close to us with transforming love, then we may discover the astonishing power of prayer that James writes about in our scripture today.

The power of prayer can take shape in many ways but I have often seen it at work when I go to the hospital before someone has surgery. When I first enter the room, the patient and I will chat for a while about the details of their surgery and such. Often the individual sounds positive,

and confident, and upbeat and projects a sense of optimism about the surgery. But then there comes the time when I ask if they would like me to pray for them. And the patient's face crumples with emotion, and their eyes fill with tears, and in a choked up voice they answer, "Oh yes, please do." And there in that noisy hospital room, with nurses and orderlies rushing by and monitors beeping, we call upon the sacred presence of God. We summon the healing power of the God of Love. And we find consolation in knowing that the Creator of the Universe, the God of Life and the God of Love does indeed care about us and our lives. Never underestimate the power of prayer.