

Sermon - Proper 21, Year B
James 5:13-20, Prayer
9/28/24

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Letter of James that has been our appointed reading for the past several weeks is a master class in the art of an on-the-ground devotional life. As followers of Jesus, we hear the Gospels and we recall the life of Christ, and we hear his instructions and his warnings and his blessings. We encounter the bold examples of the saints of the Church – the first apostles and the men and women who brought this extraordinary faith out into the world and into the light. Yes, this Jesus sounds like someone we should listen to. Yes, something about this Resurrection business feels important and true. Okay, we’re Christians. Or we are thinking about it. So what do we do now?

The Letter of James is our companion here. Over five chapters, James works out – in a lively and practical way – how to live every day as a disciple. The portion of the fifth chapter we read from today is actually the very end of the letter, and James ends with instructions regarding one of the most vital gifts we are given in our life of faith: he speaks to us about prayer.

“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 the righteous is powerful and effective.”

Prayer is not always the easiest thing to talk about, even in a place like church where – in theory – at least a few of us should know a little bit about what we’re doing. Prayer can feel a little mysterious sometimes. Perhaps even a little odd. Perhaps it doesn’t seem to do much good

at all, so what are we really supposed to do with ourselves when we hear James and St. Paul and Jesus himself invite us into this holy and urgent relationship of communication?

I only know a very small amount about prayer, but I will tell you what I know now. The first thing I know is that there is not simply one way to pray. There are as many ways to pray as there are human beings, and if you find yourself feeling bored, or frustrated, or dry in your prayers, this does not mean that you are doing it wrong. Just as each person falls in love differently or responds to things like art and music in a unique way, prayer, too, is unique. God knows you, and God loves you, and God knew the language that your heart would speak before you were born. And so you may pray in text, or in song, or in silence. The way you pray may change over the course of your life. But if you notice that your heart stirs when you open the Bible, or that your shoulders drop and your chest opens when you start a long hike through the woods, pay attention. This is an invitation to prayer.

But just as prayer is unique, it is also universal. All of us are creatures meant for communion with God, and we begin this communion through communication. Sometimes we are taught almost to think of prayer like a phone call – where we pick up the phone every so often when we need to talk to someone. This isn't wrong, but there's more. When we pray, it is more like recognizing the air around us that touches our skin and fills our lungs at all times, whether we are paying attention to it or not. Prayer isn't so much a phone call as it is like remembering that we are breathing. We couldn't live without air, and we cannot live without God. Prayer is simply when we start paying attention.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul instructs us to “pray without ceasing,” but what are we to do when our unceasing prayers seem to be met with God's silence? What does it

mean when our prayers go unanswered? How can we persist in prayer when our words seem met with nothing but absence?

The other thing I know is that the life of prayer is a life that unfolds in seasons. There are summer seasons when the harvest is ripe and good green things grow abundant. We speak, and God is right alongside us, answering lovingly each one of our petitions. Our faith strengthens and springs fresh from the assurance of God's love. What a gift to pray in these summer seasons!

But the life of prayer is a life of winter seasons too. At times, the light fades quickly and we feel abandoned, left lonely in the cold. We remember the harvests of summer and feel them to be so far away from us. God seems quiet, distant, uncaring. The snows drift up against the hearth of our heart, and there is only silence.

In the natural world, winter is a waiting season, but it is far from a barren one. While the animals sleep and the trees are bare, we know that the forests refresh themselves in silence. There is hidden growth, and, though we struggle every year to believe it, the summer will come again.

In the life of prayer, God uses the silent seasons for hidden growth of this same kind. What feels like barrenness or icy abandonment is His own careful work in us. More often than not, a season of silence in prayer is a sign that God is teaching our hearts a new language-- a new way of speaking with Him and knowing Him. The seeds of good growth are being planted within us, and in God's own good time, they will blossom in blessing.

In the meantime, it is trust that sees us through the silent seasons. When our words seem to fall on frozen ground, it is an invitation to trust in our God who never forgets us or forsakes us, whose yoke is easy, and whose only will for us is love. It is only a matter of time before the days will lengthen and the light will find us lovingly once again. Thanks be to God. Amen.