

The Power of Faith
Menno Mennonite Church
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Sermon:

One of the things that disturbs me most is the concept of theodicy. Basically, if God is so good, why does evil exist. “What did I do to deserve this?” “If God is good, why did so many die in the twin tower collapse 20 years ago?” “If God is so good, why are so many children hungry around the world?” “Is God still with me when bad things happen?” “Why does my fervent prayer not work?”

These thoughts disturb me. They shake my belief that I have a rock-solid faith. These thoughts make me afraid because little bits of doubt creep in and if I were to follow them – where would they lead? Would they lead me from God?

It is hard to trust when we don’t have all the answers -because we like to control. And when we are in the midst of sickness, death, fear, sorrow, then we are out of control/or not in control. It is then that the reasons for the turmoil become necessary to explain – its ours’/ or someone else’s fault. And we wonder, where was God? Do these questions and their explanations sound familiar?

This week when I looked at our James’ passage I was reminded of these disturbing thoughts. And the “just settled” waters were once again agitated.

16 years ago – if you had asked me to preach on this passage in James – I would have refused. You see, my mother had just died of cancer – a vibrant 64 year old woman struck down by a senseless destructive disease – I did not know what to do and in the midst of my anger, I cried out to God and God was silent.

What made my anger even fiercer was that I “had” to take a class at the seminary (in June, and she died in July) called: “Healing and Christian Spirituality.” How could I sit through this class – where we read books about and discussed all the ways that we could be healed and help people in our congregations to heal – while my mother was in her last days – and NO HEALING would cure her of the disease – and my prayers for her life were not answered?

This week, I didn’t know what to do with this James passage I still don’t know exactly what to think. I don’t always know what to pray. I know that we can’t

make light of James' suggestions for prayer healing – they work, in theory. But I don't know in practice, whether I can do this. And, I confess, I too often do not pray for healing because of my lack of faith that it will happen.

I think that part of our scepticism and cynicism in the power of healing prayer has been formed through witnessing the con artists, the all-talk-no-ethics tele-faith-healers. You know these – they're the ones who prey on the weak... to profit at the expense of the desperate. It seems that those preachers forgot "about the One from Nazareth who healed and then would say, "Go in peace...your faith has made you well...and...don't tell anyone about this!" And yet – those whom Jesus healed were transformed.

And here's where I get anxious. Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead – as did the first disciples. I've heard true stories of faith healings – the father of a friend of mine had excruciating and debilitating back pain – was anointed and prayed over by the church elders and is now able to walk and move around like a healthy man.

And yet we pray and pray with fervent hope and faith – and still our loved ones' mental health deteriorates, the cancer continues to consume, their injuries cannot be healed...

One thing that I DID learn in seminary is that sometimes it helps in understanding – in the Bible and in psychology and pastoral care – when we take apart all the pieces and look at them individually and then put them back together with a new understanding about what makes a whole. This is a good way for us who look at the bigger picture when we are overwhelmed by all the moving parts.

So, lets take a closer look at this passage from James so that we can glean from his words truths of faith, and promises of God.

James, the brother of Jesus, was a leader in the early Church in Jerusalem. While the Jerusalem church was a church that was formed within 30 years of Christ's resurrection and ascension, the church people were, like we in the broader church today, struggling with some personal and personnel issues. Some people were not honest in their speech. Some were suffering physically, maybe to the point of despair. Some needed forgiveness. Some were in trouble.

We see clearly how James responds to the needs of these needs. He says, (Now I'm reading from the NRSV)
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.

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

With just a surface reading, it seems as though James is saying our prayer of faith can work miracles – it can cure the sick and forgive sins and, like Elijah’s prayer, make it dry or make it rain. It’s almost like James is saying – “hey, prayer worked for Elijah – so if you’ve got enough faith and are righteous enough, then its gotta work for you!”

I don’t want to discount our prayers for physical healing – because we know this still happens and should be celebrated for the miracle that it is. But this is neither the limit nor the only way that we can be healed through prayer.

When read with the community situation in mind, this passage in James addresses more than just the power of prayer for healing. A closer look reveals that James invites the community to see beyond theodicy. Rev. Dr. Kenneth Carter says that “James wrote to the early Christians, and to us [so that we could begin] to see our sin and trouble and sickness [not as penalties or absences of God, but] as *occasions* for [showing] God's gifts...God’s gifts of [anointing], confession, [and] intercession These are...spiritual practices.”

Let me say that differently. When we closely inspect this passage in James 5, we see that the passage is about us practicing our spiritual gifts, and God doing the saving, the raising up and the forgiving. And what spiritual gifts and practices are these? They are Praying, Singing, Anointing, Confessing and Interceding. These spiritual gifts flow one into the other into the other. And I think a clearer

inspection of three of these gifts and practices can help us to understand what James is really saying in this passage.

Confession:

In verse 16 we read, “Confess your sins to one another.” Look. We sin. We are all sinners. Because we are human we are always pitting selfishness with goodness. Yes, we desire to let all our life be selfless in service to God, but we can’t. And sometimes we wont. We all sin. We say things that hurt others, or we purposefully do something that hurts our relationship with God, our neighbours and the earth. http://day1.org/1436-to_make_the_wounded_whole)

In Alcoholic anonymous, - a twelve step program – one of the steps – Step #5– is to confess to God and ourselves and to another person – a trusted person – “the exact nature of our wrongs.”

While AA is now seen as a multi-faith healing program, it was begun with the belief that Yahweh God is in control and only through surrendering to God’s will can our lives be reclaimed. Alcoholics Anonymous is a fantastic organization and I truly believe that more than just Alcoholics can benefit from some of the practices; confession being only a part of it.

Confession is naming the sin and admitting and owning our part in it – and then telling someone else - someone you trust, and then claiming forgiveness as a reality.

Confession lays everything bare – We are vulnerable because nothing can cover us anymore. But God knows our being – God created us bare and naked and behold we are loved – every last ugly hidden bit is seen and known and loved when we confess. And in the act of confessing we receive God’s healing. Confession is transformative.

Intercession

Another spiritual practice we see in this James passage is Intercession - praying for others. I think that this is one of the practices that we as a congregation do very well; we pray for each other. I have often heard how many of you pray for us and I know that without your prayers my spirit would be weaker and my personal and spiritual strength would falter. Thank-you for your prayers.

“Intercession is,” in the words of Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, “thinking of something or someone in the presence of God...the recognition that, in spite of appearances, God and the world belong together.”

Many things happen when we intercede for each other to God. When we lift people and situations up to God, we entrust God with them. It is an act of letting go and an act of trust and we hope and have faith that God will do what God does best – hold those we love tenderly and walk with them.

But another thing that intercession does is work within we who pray – the more we pray for others – especially for those with whom we have disagreements or for those whom we dislike – the more we find that God works within us to change our relationships from anger to forgiveness, fear into hope, hatred into love. And through the act of intercession God works to heal our relationships. Intercession is transformative.

Anointing

You may think that I’m doing this out of order – but bear with me. Anointing and Intercession are kind of linked because they are an outward prayer – they are not about us, but about another...yet the Spirit of God can move through us through these actions.

God commanded Samuel to anoint David as king. Honoured guests, priests, even those being prepared for burial were anointed. Anointing in the Bible – especially seen in the Old Testament is a symbol of claiming for the Holy. The action of anointing separated the individual from those around them and put them in a new category – the ones who are claimed for God. Christ’s name, literally means, “the anointed one” And here in the book of James we read:

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.

We see anointing done today – and some of you, when you think of anointing think of the movies and stories where the priest comes in at the death bed of an individual and performs “last rites”. Not all anointing is for the death bed. We also anoint the sick, anoint for ministry, and anoint for forgiveness and the list can go on. Anointing is claiming that person for Christ. This is not a magical action – no.

Like baptismal waters, the oil of anointing doesn't magically change you into something else...anointing is a physical symbol. Yet anointing – or being anointed is an opening for God to come and work and BE in the situation. The act of anointing affirms the anointee's place in God's kingdom – it assures them that they are noticed and loved by God, it commends them into God's care trusting that God will bring healing and peace. It is an act of recognizing the Holy in another person.

Anointing is transformative.

In James 5:15, James states “*The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.*”

In Mark 5:34 Jesus says to the woman who touched his cloak – “Daughter, your faith has saved you; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” Jesus first saved and then healed. She was healed relationally – she was no longer unclean – she was now able to participate fully in community life, she was healed spiritually – she was named as a daughter of God and commended for her faith - and lastly physically – her flow of blood stopped.

And again, I read in all four gospels how Jesus first forgave the sins of the paralyzed man and then said, “Rise up and walk...”

James writes in James 5: 15 The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.

What is most important here? The verbs are **will save** and **will raise**. Not will cure and will restore to health. Maybe the more important healing is not the physical...but the spiritual *the Lord will raise them up* may also refer to our resurrection, which is the ultimate healing.”

The best statement I have read about what healing is and what it is not can be found in the introduction to Healing Services and Prayers in the United Methodist book of Worship. Here it says that “All healing is of God. The Church's healing ministry in no way detracts from the gifts God gives through medicine and psychotherapy.... God does not promise that we will be cured of all illnesses; Healing is not the same as curing...It is a mystery.”

“The greatest healing of all is the reunion or reconciliation of a human being with God. When this happens, physical healing sometimes occurs, mental and emotional

balance is often restored, spiritual health is enhanced, and relationships are healed.” <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/healing-services-and-prayers>

And we, maybe we need to change our language. Instead of thinking of curing when we speak about healing, what of looking at healing in a more holistic and biblical perspective. What should be noted in this passage of James is that none of the healing comes from our hands or our words. Authentic healing is the work of Yahweh – the God who was and is and is to come – the three – Father, Son and Spirit. It is not OUR doing, but God’s doing. No amount of prayer or sacrifice of faith will make us healers or healed.

Rather the praying, the singing, confessions, intercessions and anointings are conduits/doors/even little cracks that open to allow God’s spirit of love and Shalom – which is wholeness – to come in and dwell with the individual or the individual who is prayed for. These are not self-serving practices – but rather they are acts of submission and humility, acts of emptying and surrender. Only when we give ourselves to God for healing can God’s healing work begin.

Can we know the mind of God? Were we there when God laid the foundation of the earth? Do we know why some make it through terrible diseases and others do not? Do we know why bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people? I do not. But I have come to a place where I am beginning to trust that God is beside me and I fervently pray for this for all of us.

Wrestling with the text is only useful if we are willing to be disturbed – moved, interrupted – by what we find. Finding that this passage is less about faith healing and more about using our God-given-gifts to show God’s power is more than just a reframing – to me it changes everything. We pray when we suffer. We sing for joy when we are cheerful. We anoint the sick in the name of the LORD. We confess our sins to each other, and we pray for each other. But it is The LORD who saves the sick, the LORD raises them up, the LORD forgives sins and the LORD heals.

Give us eyes and hearts to know this. Thanks be to God for the part in God’s healing work that we are able to be for one another.