

Acting in Prayer

Menno Mennonite Church
September 29, 2024

Purpose: To put prayer in the context of faith and works.

Message: As people of works we need not neglect the work of prayer as part of the living faith.

Scripture: James 5:13-20 (I will read); Mark 9:38-50 (Please read)

Synopsis: We often pit doing against being when it comes to faith. That includes our inclination to pray alongside the challenges that we have. When we come to confronting the problems of our life and living, we are firstly inclined to do something—anything—in order to address the issue. Sometimes, we even come to prayer as a bit of last resort in the realm of how we address that which ails us. While we rightly prioritize being doers of the word, we also need to be reminded now and again that the work of prayer in its many shapes and sizes is a doing of the word, and an incarnation of God's love. While we also do well to consider the ways in which we can also diagnose life problems as prayer problems alone, we also need to hold our praying as part of being who and what we are called to be as well.

James 5: 13-20 (Message)

Are you hurting? Pray.
Do you feel great? Sing.
Are you sick? Call the church leaders together to pray
and anoint you with oil in the name of the Master.

Believing-prayer will heal you,
and Jesus will put you on your feet.
And if you've sinned, you'll be forgiven—healed inside and out.

Make this your common practice:
Confess your sins to each other
and pray for each other
so that you can live together whole and healed.

The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with.

Elijah, for instance, human just like us,
prayed hard that it wouldn't rain, and it didn't—
not a drop for three and a half years.

Then he prayed that it would rain, and it did.
The showers came and everything started growing again.

¹⁹⁻²⁰ My dear friends,
if you know people who have wandered off from God's truth,
don't write them off. Go after them.

Get them back and you will have rescued precious
lives from destruction
and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God.

I wonder what is on your “what if” list. You know the one: the task list that most of us have in the back of our heads just in case something goes wrong. I don’t know about you, but it is part of my imagination. The things that you might want to be sure grab on your way out the door were you to need to evacuate with a fire on the horizon: important Papers, laptop and server, a few changes of clothes if there is time. Needing to head out and get going one way or the next. Or maybe a phone call speaking to illness far away: you have a plan, how you might respond, where to go and what to do is up here somewhere in my head. Knowing what needs to be done and thinking it through even in imagination is somehow reassuring. To be sure this is not something I spend huge quantities of time dwelling on or worrying about. At its best this is me working with a puzzle in the hypothetical, thinking through the options for how things might need to come together. Maybe it is just a by-product of working in a field where you know too well that life has a way of changing when you are least expecting it, often with the simple ringing of the phone. It bursts the bubble that allows you to think “things can’t happen” because they do—more often than we like to consider—and we are left needing to find a new way to live and adapt. It is something that we do when we consider the unpredictability of life and I strongly suspect that I am not alone in the hobby of imagining.

But I strongly suspect that I am also not alone at all to confess that in my various scenarios of how to get on within the crisis of life, my checklist by in large doesn’t have prayer within it. Our if this then that logic doesn’t really take a lot of time to consider the spiritual implications of what is going on and why. Our preparations are geared far more to the practical and pragmatic to make sure that we have an available backup ready to go then to reach out to the God who provides all that we need in the midst of our tough situations. News of a tough diagnosis often brings questions along with sympathy: what are the plans; what might the doctors be saying; what treatments formal and informal we hear are effective and workable for similarly situations like this that we have heard of before. Sometime later we can hear about it as a matter of prayer. I always rejoice a little bit in the working of the prayer chain—of being able to reach out and ask for the support of the body of the church in the working of prayer is a significant thing. Being able to raise your hand and share a need is a gift that community offers and our prayers, often quiet though they may be, go with you and for you along the way. I think there is a lot of goodness in that. That we are willing to share the toughness of life when and as we are ready and hold them as a body is significant. Being and object of prayer is something that can

often push us a bit out of our self-sufficiency where we are most comfortable. But being known in community for and in prayer is a big powerful thing, but that doesn't make it particularly natural or easy for us to embrace as a standard operating procedure.

James as we have been sitting with this month is all about the fusion of the life and faith. Time and again he goes to the well of faith absent the actions of faith being dead. We know that faith wants to do things in order to be put into being. Especially as we stand at the edge of a week where we will be doing a lot of action and a lot of doing—it had begun already—we can feel that a call about tending the work of prayer may seem like a call too questionable time management. There is simply too much to be done and prayer isn't going to get the tent standing up right. Many times, we reserve prayer for the end of the list, long after everything else has been tried and exhausted then particularly where we lend ourselves to first.

But these are not the prayers of passivity that we are dealing with here. James goes through his list of the ills of life and pronounces them as causes for prayer. Far from being a comprehensive list of when and how to pray, we hear James point us time and again to the work of praying through the stuff of our lives. The word prayer is mentioned 8 times in the 7 verses I just read and 3 of those were in the imperative (in other words; do this). Far from being done with his blunt assessment of the Christian lifestyle and even more direct recommendations for it, he ends the letter with this active sense of being about the work of prayer, putting spiritual flesh on the faithful bones of the life of belief. There is no question here that prayer becomes the backbone of the living reality of faith. Elijah is held up not because he was a superhero prophet of some sort that stopped the rain for 3 years just because he could, but as a model of how God's will being welded to individual prayerfulness. Even if you are given to struggle with the notion of a YHWH God that brings drought and famine we should not let it deflect us from the main point: There is a goodness in prayer and God that wants say yes within and through even creation for working out God's own good purposes.

This profession—that the praying faithful person is something powerful to deal with—raises a number of questions that, in all honesty do not have easy or obvious answers. We have to deal with the sticky question of “well, if it is so powerful, why do my prayers fail to yield what I most want and we most need?” Or, more succinctly: why does God say no? Here, too, I am guessing our stories abound about the times and places where prayer did not live up to our expectations from it. Sometimes the prayers for relief take far longer than what seems fair or

reasonable. Sometimes healing does not come in the form and fashion we might want it to. Often our fervent prayers for peace fall mute as war seems to hold the upper hand. This list goes on. I am not going to stand here and say that I have good answers for the WHY of any of this; I do not. As tempting as it is to diagnose and analyze style and technique in order to come to the perfect formula to get God to do what you want, I think attempting to do so somewhat misses the point. It misses that prayer is not necessarily about our expressing our needs and expectations to God pleading our case in the right way to ensure we can go to the birthday party as promised (a technique of prayer I am recognizing more and more from our children pleading what they want by promising what they are willing to give for it). Instead, prayer is bringing that which concerns us before God truthfully and honestly, without the bluff and guile of setting up a divine version of Let's Make a Deal. Instead, prayer brings that which we need and that which we suffer and that which we do into the realm and goodness of God, knowing that there is a desire to say yes within God's good intent. Prayer also shapes us toward the goodness of God, guiding us toward the ways that God works within the realities of the world as they are for what they are, even when they are not that which we might choose of for ourselves.

One of the most important points of praying, I think, is among the most over looked and sometimes undervalued. If you have been listening, I am sure you have heard it. It is the concept of praying God's kingdom into being on a regular basis: "Your kingdom come on Earth as it is in heaven". When you think about the models of prayer that we have, this is interwoven time and again. Certainly in the direct teaching of the Lords prayer but also the modeled working of the prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus points us toward a way of prayer that has to do with our willing God's goodness into our life, trusting that goodness and seeking that will every bit as much as it does with out presenting our petitions that we might be healed. Does that mean that we should just give it up and not ask for that which we need and the healing that we seek—of course not. We can do so with confidence and with hope and even with expectation of the good that we seek. But we can never do so without also praying alongside this—your will be done—and working on the consequences of that and bringing those consequences however slowly into our lives. We pray because there is power within that prayer: but we also must allow that power to direct itself as it choses within us, aligning our will with God's however incrementally we may be able to.

[Luke birth narrative]

None of which is an invitation to a moment of inaction. We don't pray and then somehow shrug and dismiss it "if it be your will" and call it good enough. We dare not simply allow our best wishes expressed in the quiet of our hearts be ever thought fully sufficient for the work of confronting injustice, bringing about peace, or addressing suffering. Prayer, James is saying, is the foundation for righteous activity from which we can understand God in our lives. It must form the foundation of addressing that which is the world—the good and the bad—not to magically insulate from the challenges of the world, but to bring ourselves to God despite them, growing to trust God within them the best ways we know how. Jesus' friends always preface and bracket our attempts to address the stuff of the world in the prayerful profession that it is God who will turn both our prayers and our actions into something that will accomplish what it must in the lives of people throughout creation. That is the action based prayer that we are invited to, being called time and again into the work of healing the world even as we ourselves are invited to cleave ever more tightly to God's will and God's love.

As we prepare ourselves this week in particular, may we be in prayer that God's will might be known in us, through us, and in spite of us, and that the glory of God might be known on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.