

Faith that Works 4: *A Community Forged in Prayer*

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Mark 9:30-32

³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

James 5:13-20

¹³Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Are 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. ¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has

committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore 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. ¹⁷Elijah 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. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

¹⁹My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, ²⁰you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

As we come to the end of this series on the Letter of James, I am reminded of something Howard Thurman once said. That great theologian, Civil Rights Leader, author and pastor, Howard Thurman said, “Do not ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

To be alive in the faith is what the writer of James wants for us – the church. To be a worshipping people who do not leave our praises behind in the sanctuary when we go about our daily rounds. To be a community who put into practice what we say we believe. James saw Christian people live in a world of injustice, inequality, oppression and violence.

His letter is clear, blunt, and plain spoken to summon the church to faithful discipleship. Over this month we have heard James say: Faith without works is dead. Be doers of the word, and not hearers only. Watch your tongue. Be careful about what you say, because your words can do great damage. Fires are lit by human speech causing destruction and violence. In all of your work and interactions be guided by the wisdom that comes from above – the wisdom of gentleness that leads to peace. Everything that James has addressed in this Letter is about what it means to be disciples of Christ in and for the world by the values, the qualities and characteristics of being in a community that answers to a higher calling.

According to James, acquiring more and more wealth is no measure of success; but bridging the gap between rich and poor is. Judging others as enemy and outsider is not God’s way for us; but loving our neighbors as we love ourselves is. Having faith in God means nothing in and of itself, but being generous, gracious and forgiving as God is generous, gracious and forgiving leads us to life! What God needs is people who have come alive to the ways of God’s loving the world.

And, tying all of James’ instruction together, woven throughout the entire letter, is the thread of communal partnership. We are not meant to

be people of faith alone. The gospel does not call us to a “Me and My Savior,” kind of one-on-one relationship. We are in this good work of Christian discipleship together.

This point is driven home by today’s reading about prayer. We are a community of Christ because we are forged in prayer. We pray together. We pray for one another. we hold each other accountable. We practice our faith in community first. Then strengthened by a communal partnership of prayer our faith works for the benefit of the world.

Professor of New Testament and Homiletics, David Bartlett, regularly preached at the Congregational Church of New Haven when he was teaching at Yale Divinity School. He told a story of one of their parishioners named Janet Eberman. She always greeted him at the door and showed him the kind of gentle strength of faith she spread among that congregation for many years. As she grew older, her mind was sharp until the end, but her hearing was not so good.

That became clear every Sunday when it came time for the Lord’s Prayer. Janet always prayed aloud, but because she didn’t hear anyone else, she prayed at her own pace, usually about two beats behind the rest of the congregation. After Janet had died, David preached a sermon to that church saying, “What I remember most is not just her praying, but the way you prayed with her. The prayer always ended this way. Everybody but Janet said, “For thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever...” and then you all got quiet, creating a pause in the prayer – so that lagging a little behind – Janet’s voice was loud enough for all of us to hear, “For thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever.” And then all of you, Janet and the rest of you, said together: Amen.” Then using that example of gentle, prayerful, faithful togetherness, David challenged that congregation, saying: “Continue to

be the church. Wait for one another. Listen to one another. Lift each other up.”¹

This is what James is encouraging the church to be -- a community forged in prayer. Praying together is an essential act of faith, a key value for a faith that works, as we invoke the power of God to be present in the life and witness of the church. James writes:¹⁵ *The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven... pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.* These words cover a lot of ground – healing prayer, solidarity in community, forgiveness of sins – but it is all tied together into a common theme: prayer is a communal activity for the faithful of God to engage together.

Now, skeptics might criticize this text for being much too simplistic and dismissive of modern understandings. We don’t just need prayer for healing; we need science, we need medicine, of course. However, the biblical text is not promoting an inherent contradiction between faith and reason. It is lifting up the importance of the community’s solidarity with the one who is sick. We – as a community – surround those in need with our prayers, trusting God for answers. Likewise, the act of forgiveness is one of the most significant deeds a person can perform. But even forgiveness is not a solitary performance. As one biblical scholar writes, “Forgiveness participates in God’s global redemption. Prayer and forgiveness contribute to the transformation of this whole broken world back to God’s intended goodness.

James recalls Elijah whose singular act of prayer contributed to replenishing much needed rains upon the earth. By this example a single prayer for healing and a single act of forgiveness can trigger a shower of

¹ David Bartlett, “Doing the Word,” a sermon preached at the Congregational Church of New Haven, from *The Collected Sermons of David Bartlett*.

God's redeeming love throughout the earth."² You see, prayer is a foundation of Christian community, linking us to the power of God, a type of conversation with God that becomes a catalyst for healing, for nurturing solidarity, the vehicle through which doors are opened. Praying together assures a brighter tomorrow because it changes things, it changes us. When you pray for it you are more likely to work for it.

The Dalai Lama, the leader of Tibetan Buddhism, has said, "Be careful of your thoughts; they become your words. Be careful of your words, they become your actions. Be careful of your actions, they become your habits. Be careful of your habits, they become your character. Be careful of your character, it becomes your destiny." The author of the Letter of James was nurturing the destiny of the early church, which has become our calling as we seek to be faithful in a complicated, violent, conflicted moment in time. We cannot separate our devotion from our discipleship. Spiritual depth fuels courageous faith. Genuine faith compels us to action.

Kathy Beach, a pastoral colleague of mine told me a story about a little church in eastern North Carolina that was on the brink of closing. The town has suffered an economic downturn. A county over, only about fifteen miles away, a big Walmart had moved in and small businesses couldn't compete so they closed. Children of long-time residents went off to college and never came back. Empty storefronts, fewer young people, little hope for the community itself to thrive, what hope was there for the church?

However, that intrepid congregation of thirty or forty members got together and talked about how they could no longer afford even a part-time pastor, or keep the building in good repair. But they did not want to lose their sense of community. So they organized their own worship, took turns reading scripture and praying together, and every Sunday folks who showed up brought a dish to share from home and they ate

² Magrey DeVega, *A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series*, p. 149.

together. After a while, the conversation turned from sharing grief about how so much had changed and how the church might need to close, to how they still had one another and enough money to do some good in the community. Over one of their Sunday potluck lunches, they started talking about the refugees who had migrated into the area to work on those farms in Eastern North Carolina. They shared concerns about the needs those migrants must have, having had to leave their home countries, not yet fluent in English; raising their children on migrant wages; living under the insecurity of immigration regulations. It was as if one grieving little congregation could see the grief in their neighbors.

Now, a few years later, this church still can't afford a pastor, but through their prayers and potlucks, they have a mission, a vibrant ministry. They have partnered with other small congregations of varying denominations; They have welcomed new neighbors from the Republic of Congo, Afghanistan and Myanmar. They have hosted clothing drives and helped young children into daycare and into their county's public schools while their parents' work. One of their partner organizations describes their work this way: "Each immigrant in our community is an individual made in the image of God with inherent worth and dignity. Radical hospitality is an opportunity to recognize and honor this humanity. Welcoming the stranger is not just an act of kindness but a divine calling on all our lives to reflect the heart of the gospel and the love of Christ to those most in need."

Friends, the primary message of the Letter of James is contained in the good work of that small church in eastern North Carolina. They bear witness to a faith that works. They are practicing the kind of speech that God loves to hear. They are living by a wisdom that comes from above – the wisdom of gentleness. By their example, they call us more deeply toward the church of Jesus Christ which is forged in the power of prayer. What the world needs is more people who have come alive – like that.

AMEN.