

“PRAYERS OF FAITH”

James 5:13-20

September 27, 2009

If I were to make a guess, I'd say that most everyone (if not everyone) in this room prays. It may be every morning as you wake up and before your feet hit the floor. It may be kneeling alongside your bed, before you crawl in at the end of the day. I used to get frustrated when I was praying at night because I'd fall asleep and not remember if I finished my prayer or not. My concern was alleviated when a friend suggested that falling asleep while praying was really a nice thing...that it was like leaving the line to God open all night long!

Perhaps your prayer life is less frequent than daily – maybe once a week – Sundays, perhaps. Or maybe you're the kind of person who thinks of praying when a crisis comes up. John Hull, co-author of the book *Pivotal Praying*, writes, “There are times when unexpected, emergency situations hit our lives. Out of utter desperation, we call directly on God for help. Nothing else will suffice.”

This quote suggests that it may not be the frequency of our prayers, but rather the situation. In this morning's scripture lesson, James seeks to expand our understanding of situations that beg for prayer as a fitting response.

I imagine the conversation that James might have with a friend (or a total stranger) walking down the street. James extends his hand to the other person and offers the standard greeting: “Hey, how are you doing?” And then, depending on the response he gets, he would continue:

Aww, you're hurting? You should pray! Or

Glad to hear you're feeling great! You should pray! Or

I'm sorry that you're sick. You should call the church leaders together to pray!

Hmm, so you're dealing with temptation and sin? You should confess and pray for forgiveness!

Do you get the picture of what James is trying to say here? He's saying that there is no situation that doesn't call for prayer. Whether you're on a mountaintop experience, or down in the valleys, in good health, or struggling, basking in an abundance of wealth, or finding it impossible to make ends meet...all are times to pray.

If that's a message that sounds familiar, it's because James isn't the only one to propose it. The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, “Rejoice *always*, pray *without ceasing*, give thanks in *all* circumstances.” John Wesley would call this pattern of activity “Christian perfection” with prayer being “the breath of our spiritual life.”

James, however, adds a phrase that should capture our attention. He says in chapter 5 verse 15, “*The prayer of faith* will save the sick...” Is it possible to pray without faith? In the same way, what difference does praying in faith make?

The Bible is filled with stories and quotes about the difference faith makes in the prayer life of the people of God. Early in the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel, we find the story of Hannah. Hannah had a good husband who loved her very much. In fact, he treated her like a queen. But Hannah was very unhappy. She was unable to conceive a child. Her husband's other wife, Peninah, would tease her relentlessly, making her even more miserable.

One day, Hannah went to the temple, knelt down, and began to pray. This was no ordinary prayer – like the ones she had prayed so often in the past. This was a big faith prayer. In her prayer, she wept bitterly and spoke these words: “O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death.” When the old priest Eli heard her prayer, he assured her that it would be answered.

In the New Testament, we hear story after story of how people, ordinary everyday people, strangers to Jesus and the disciples, called out to him for healing. In Mark chapter 5, Jesus has just crossed the lake when he is approached by one of the leaders of the synagogue. Jairus fell at the feet of Jesus and begged him, “My little girl is near death. Come and lay hands on her so that she may be made well.” Jairus didn't ask Jesus if he *could* heal his daughter – he prayed in faith that Jesus *would* heal his daughter – and he did.

In that same chapter, Jesus is surrounded by a great crowd. Pushing her way through the crowd was a woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years. If she had been recognized by anyone, they would certainly have chased her out of their midst as one who was unclean. But she knew that she needed to get to Jesus. Again, scripture doesn't indicate that she asked Jesus if he could help her. She simply reached out – in faith – and touched his cloak, and was healed.

Jesus taught us to pray with faith, and that even the most difficult of challenges could be overcome. In Mark 11, Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you.”

I remember attending an UMY's event several years ago. The morning devotion was this passage from Mark 11. One of the youth asked, “Was Jesus talking about a literal mountain, or was this a metaphor for some big thing in our lives?” It was a great question, one that we discussed at length. While most of our conversation drifted in the direction of the metaphors Jesus might have been imagining, another of the youth said, “Don't you think it could mean a real mountain?” After the chuckling died down, he went on: “Have you ever prayed that a mountain would move from one spot to another? And if you have, did you believe that it would really happen?” And many were left wondering...

Jesus goes on in Mark 11, “So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” Jesus and James seem to be in agreement – prayers of faith are effective.

I’m sure I’ve talked before about our Annual Conference’s emphasis on GREAT churches. GREAT is an acronym for churches that are:

- Growing in Christ-likeness
- Reaching out to the least, the lost and the left out
- Expecting God to do great things
- Asking people into life-changing relationships with Jesus Christ
- Telling others what God has done in your life

The ‘E’ in the GREAT challenge is what we’re talking about when we use the phrase ‘faith prayer.’ It is a prayer that we pray...expecting God to do something great. Now that something great may not be exactly what we were anticipating or hoping for, but we trust that God knows the greatness we need.

So how is it with your prayer life? Do you simply go through the checklist, praying for one thing after another with no real passion or enthusiasm? Or are you praying prayers of faith – prayers that acknowledge that our God is the creator of all things, that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, and that the Holy Spirit is our constant companion? Do we pray our prayers in such a way that we *believe* we are making a difference through what we say and how we say it?

Remember what James tells us – “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective, and “The prayer of faith will save the sick.” May all of our prayers be faith-filled prayers. AMEN.