
Pray for healing
Martin Grove United Church
April 22, 2018
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on James 3:13-38 and James 5:13-18

If you've come here before, you will know that we often deal with scriptural passages that are a bit unclear and hard to understand. Part of the fascination I find in ministry is exploring and unpacking those unclear or ambiguous passages in the Bible and helping to bring the meaning of the text into our current reality. And it's a real privilege to be able to do that every week.

So I have to wonder if anyone else here was surprised by the passages we just read from James. Because those texts, and in particular, the second piece from James 5, seems to require no explanation whatsoever. "If any among you are suffering, they should pray. If any among you are sick, they should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them." Now really - is any of that hard to understand? Is any of that impossible to do? Is any of that even difficult to do? No, not really. Wait - do we have elders in this church? Well of course we do. Not officially of course, but this church has many dedicated pray-ers, including our prayer group. We have a pastoral care committee made up of compassionate people. We have our council which makes up the "spiritual leadership" of this church. We have other members that you know and trust. And people certainly approach me for prayers. How often do you have something on your heart and you approach an elder of this church to pray with you?

On Easter Sunday, after our the service here, Marjorie and I went to my son, Ian's church at McMaster University, because he invited us to his church that day. I won't unpack the whole event here, but I was struck that at the end of their service, they announced that all around the outside of the room were people with name tags, and that people should approach anyone with a name tag if they wanted prayer. That church had people stationed around the room for the sole purpose of praying with people as they left the sanctuary. They even announced the offer for prayer after telling people they could go downstairs for a free dinner, so I knew they were serious about prayer.

But before we get too deep, what is prayer anyway? Prayer, in its simplest terms, is conversation between you and God. That conversation may or may not include words of course. Some people prefer to use the term “meditation” when there are no words, but for me, it’s all prayer. Some people tell me that “conversation” may even be some type of physical activity, an activity that connects them with God in meaningful ways. I’m reading a book right now about the spirituality of riding a bicycle.

The church in its wisdom has categories for prayers. Some categories are structural. For example “responsive prayer” simply means that we echo the conversation back and forth between a leader and the congregation, as we usually do during our own Prayers of the People. We have prayers of approach, we have lamentations, we have prayers that are just long sighs. And we have prayers without words. Perhaps the best known category of prayer is “intercessory prayer”. Intercession is understood to mean making a petition on behalf of another person. Or in common language, “asking God for something”.

Intercessory prayer is therefore unique in one sense. If you pray and ask God for something, then you open yourself up to the possibility of seeing the change you wanted, or not. You open yourself up to wondering if your request was reasonable. You open yourself up to wondering if God is even listening. Does prayer work? After many years of prayer, I can only say, that it depends what you ask for.

[ask for shared prayer stories]

[psalm 23]

The National Prayer Bank is a web site where people submit, and respond, to prayer requests. When I last checked, they had handled 1,258,273 prayers. So I did a bit of research to see what people - on that web site at least - pray about.

Here are some real examples of prayer requests on the web site:

- “I pray that Bill might find comfort and wisdom in a right relationship with the Lord and saviour Jesus Christ”.
- “I need a financial miracle”
- “Pray for my sister who loves the Lord to pass her Nurse Practitioner Exam.”

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- “Asking prayers for me and my wife to be completely debt free and the money to pay all our weekly financial obligations.”
 - “Pray for my mom and dad who have ailments that they are healed. That I will be a daughter who honours them and takes care of them effortlessly. I am a full-time care giver of my mom. It is very burdensome and I dread to go because of unresolved issues when I was younger. Please pray for my soul so that I am free to also intercede for those the Lord has placed in His will for my purpose to come to fruition.”
 - “Not being able to get pregnant has devastated me. I’m beginning to feel like God is punishing me for some unknown reason and that in some strange way, He is enjoying my pain. I know he’s not punishing me and I know my pain causes HIM pain, so why won’t He let it happen? Why do teenagers and drug addicts get to have a child but I do not? Please pray for healing my ovaries and spiritual renewal.”
 - “Please pray for me that I will quit smoking. I have been praying about this for years and I continue to smoke. Please pray that God will take the desire for me to smoke away and that He will help me to quit.”
 - “God please supply my rent today and money for all of my bills. God please help me with my life, bring restoration to me for all the things I lost.”

I find the experience of reading other people’s prayers to be very humbling actually. Some prayers made me wonder about the theology of the person making the request, but many were very thoughtful and seemed to reflect a much deeper understanding of the human condition. Yes, it’s true that some of the requests seem selfish and unreasonable, but many made me wish I could sit down and have a coffee with the individual making the request. I encourage you to read through prayer requests online yourself and see what you can learn about prayer and your own faith.

And although we might be critical of some of the prayers - including some that I just read - at least these people are willing to verbalize their prayers and make them public. My experience in the United Church of Canada is that we prefer not to share our

prayers - in general. Since I've come here, most weeks during the "Prayers of the People", I make intentional space for all of us to share our own prayers - out loud or not. And the response to that has been interesting. Some weeks we hear quite a few voices, some weeks we don't hear any voices. I hope you know that I'm never judging any of you during prayers. Whether you voice your prayers or simply think them. It's all good and it's all prayer.

Interestingly, prayer is one of the back-bones of most online churches. My favourite "virtual church" used to be "St. Pixels", an online church community offering many elements of traditional church. But the feature I used most often was the "prayer room". At the scheduled time I would enter the prayer space, and be present with other people around the world. Sessions lasted about 20 minutes. People could type messages to the group, but I really preferred the times of intentionally silent prayer. Nobody typed anything at all during prayer time. But when the 20 minutes were over there was a massive outpouring from people expressing gratitude for the presence of each other during our time of silent prayer. All space can be sacred space - even virtual space.

I realize that many of us in this congregation are not very tech-savvy, and you might find it hard to imagine logging into web site and entering a "space" just to be connected to other people - in silence. But I found it very powerful and special. Perhaps sometimes it is easier to engage with strangers. Anonymity can distance people, but it can also bring people together in other ways that can be quite meaningful.

St. Pixels also had a 3D virtual sanctuary where people could go for regular worship services. People went as avatars, you even got to walk down the isle and pick your seat. But that's another story.

Anonymous prayers have a valid purpose. But James pushes the point further. He does not just say we should pray for healing. He goes on, "confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed." Ok - well I think I see the problem here. "Confess your sins to one another" really doesn't sound very ... United Churchy to me. And yet, according to James, that is in fact a pathway to healing. So here's a question. James was just James, we don't have to believe him. Martin Luther thought that the book of James didn't even belong in the Bible. So the question is - do

we believe that our healing is dependent on our willingness to be open and vulnerable with each other? And - heaven forbid - to pray for each other?

What does James mean by “confess your sins to each other”? Isn't that a Catholic thing? Well, formal confession to a priest in a booth is a Catholic thing, yes. But the concept - and the need for confession - is universal.

Confession requires openness. Confession requires vulnerability and some degree of acceptance of lack of control over one's own life. I myself have received countless “confessions” visiting inmates in prison. Not that the word “confession” would ever have been used, but vulnerable people who need healing automatically utilize confession as part of their healing. That's why it is so powerful when somebody at AA says, “Hi, my name is Paul, and I'm an alcoholic.” There is no healing without truth. And confession is simply naming that truth. Maybe confession is more United-Churchy than I thought!

James shares with us his vision for a community of people who confess their sins to one another - in other words, people who share their lives with each other, as a place where deep healing can be found. But in my experience, when people need healing, we sometimes actually stay away from church altogether. We often stay away from family and friends too, because we don't want to be seen in a weakened state, or because we don't want other people to see us as needy, or because we don't want other people to see us cry, or because we don't want other people to pity us, or because we just don't want to be vulnerable.

But James says that our healing comes from being part of a church community, bringing our whole selves into that community - which includes the “good” and the “bad” - sharing our lives with each other, praying together, and finding healing - together.

That church that James describes - could it be this church?

Amen.