

PENTECOST 19B – 9/30/18
The Church as a Healing Community
(James 5:13-20)

When you are sick or suffering from some kind of disease or ailment or illness or physical injury, you go to the doctor, right? That just makes sense. That's what we all *typically* do.

Well, a woman once went to the doctor with a persistent problem that just wouldn't go away. Now, it was a *group* practice, you see, employing more than one doctor, and so on this particular occasion she was actually seen by one of the *new* doctors, a young one whom she had never met before. And she had only been in the examining room for a few minutes when she burst out screaming and ran down the hall.

An older doctor, one who she *was* familiar with and who was familiar with *her*, ran after her and, when he finally caught up with her, he took her into *another* examining room and asked her to sit down and relax. Then he asked her what the problem was.

Upon hearing her complaint, this older doctor then immediately marched back to the first one and said, "What's the matter with you? Mrs. Terry is 63 years old! She has four grown children and seven grandchildren! And you told her that she was *pregnant*?!"

The new doctor just smiled smugly, and didn't even look up as he continued to write on his clipboard. After the briefest of pauses, he simply responded, "Cured her hiccups, though, didn't it?"

This morning we come to the fifth, and final, week of our sermon series on the book of James. *This* James, and not either of the ones who were among the twelve disciples, was actually the younger brother of Jesus, as we have already learned. And, despite the fact – as scripture tells us – that he, at first, did not understand or believe in Jesus, nevertheless after becoming a witness to the resurrection, he not only became a believer *himself*, but also became the very first bishop of the church in Jerusalem as well.

And, *in* that capacity, James the brother of Jesus, as we have also previously noted, was much more concerned about the *practical* aspects of living out the faith than he was with any deep theological issues or doctrines. In other words, unlike Peter and Paul and the other apostles, James was much more of a *pastor* than he was a theologian or missionary.

On the one hand, this lack of theological depth in the letter which bears his name, has led some – most notably Martin Luther himself – to discount, devalue, and even discredit, James’ contribution to the Bible. In fact, Luther actually referred to the Letter of James as the “epistle of straw.” This was in comparison to St. Paul’s writings, for example, and probably because Luther feared that, when James said things like “faith without works is dead,” for Luther this ran the risk of placing works *over* faith, or being seen as more *important* than faith, and the possibility therefore of a kind of “works-righteousness” which emphasized our *own* efforts instead of the sheer grace and mercy of God.

But, on the other hand, James, I think, was simply arguing – and correctly it seems to me – that a purely intellectual faith, without actual deeds or actions that then *grow out of* or are *inspired by* that faith, was

not *truly* faith at all. Faith, he believed, actually *does* inspire and inform our actions and decisions.

Even Luther, over time, grudgingly conceded this point, since it appears that he eventually dropped this reference to an “epistle of straw” in his later writings. In fact, Luther himself famously wrote: “Good works do not make a man good. *But,*” he added, “a good man *does* good works.” So, even for Luther then, it seems, faith and works are inextricably bound together...

Now, as you may have noticed, in the four weeks leading up to this morning, our readings from James have focused primarily on what was perhaps *lacking* and, therefore, needed *improving* in the life of the church. So he reminded his readers that they needed to be “doers” and not merely “hearers” of God’s word; that they should not show favoritism or partiality, but should care for the needs of *all people*, especially the weakest and most vulnerable among them; that they should also watch their tongues and take care over what they say to one another; and finally that they should strive for gentleness and peace, and avoid divisive conflict in the church.

Since that was the case, this morning comes then as a breath of fresh air, so to speak. In other words, rather than focusing on what they (or we) *shouldn’t* be doing, this morning James focuses, *instead*, on what they (and we) *should* be doing. In a nutshell, James is telling his people, and telling us as well, that the church needs to be a “healing” community.

As Edward Markquart has written, “James says that we are to care for the sick and suffering within our congregation. James says that we are to pray for them. James says that we are to anoint them with oil. James

says that we are to pray for forgiveness within people's hearts and between people so that there will be healing *within* hearts and *between* people. James says that if certain people wander away from Christ, we are to bring them back to this community of compassion and healing." In other words, they were really not all that much different from us, were they?

Now, when *we* are sick and suffering, of course, we go straight to the doctor's, don't we? Again, as I noted at the outset this morning. In James' day, however, and – this is important – not just because they didn't have the doctors or the medical options that we do today, he instead advised his parishioners, *first*, to pray and, *second*, to call upon the leaders (or elders) of the church to come and anoint them with oil, which was an ancient practice and ritual of healing.

In other words, if you are sick, says James, turn to God and to the community of faith. Why? Because, along with everything else, the church is *called* to be a healing community. It's intended to be a "safe" place where people can seek and find sanctuary and refuge; where they can seek and find encouragement and affirmation; where they can seek and find those who will care and, what's more, will care *for them*; and where they can also seek and find forgiveness and reconciliation.

You see, as much as we tend to separate the physical from the spiritual in our own day and time, in the ancient world, in biblical times, the two – the physical and the spiritual – went hand-in hand.

You will notice, for instance, that in our reading this morning the word "save" appears two times; in verse 15 and then again in verse 20. The Greek word here is *sozo* (sode'-zo) and it can mean to save both in a

physical sense, as in to “heal,” but also in a spiritual sense as well. It is also the root of the word *soter* (so-tare’) which is usually translated as “savior” but can also mean “healer.” So what I’m trying to say here, then, is that, in the Bible at least, physical *healing* and spiritual *saving* are really one in the same. In other words, the two – again – go hand-in-hand.

Do you remember the story in Mark chapter two where Jesus healed the paralytic whose friends cut a hole in the roof of the house where Jesus was teaching, and lowered him down? When Jesus saw their faith, we’re told, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

Perhaps you *also* remember that, when Jesus said this, the scribes objected and accused Jesus of blasphemy. After all, who but God can forgive sins, they argued. And do you remember what Jesus then said to them? “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk.’? But so that you may *know* that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins – he said to the paralytic – ‘I say to you, stand up, take your mat, and go to your home.’ And he stood up, and immediately took up the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed...” says Mark.

And what’s *really* interesting, is that even in our own time there is substantial evidence of this deep and profound connection between the physical and the spiritual, and between prayer and healing.

For example, Dr. Elizabeth Targ, a psychiatrist at the Pacific College of Medicine out in San Francisco, has done tests on the role of prayer

in critically ill AIDS patients. All 20 patients, in one particular study, received the very same medical treatment, but only *half* of them were prayed for. Ultimately, all 10 of the prayed-for patients lived, while 4 of those who had *not* been prayed for died.

In a similar study, a Dr. Randy Bird followed 393 coronary care patients at Duke University Hospital. Now, and this is important to note here, Dr. Bird is not a Christian, and this was not therefore a Christian study. But he nevertheless asked the question, “Does prayer have any impact on a patient’s healing?”

Without any of the patients knowing it, people were asked to pray for only half of these heart patients. The groups were comparable in terms of age and the severity of their medical conditions. And the people praying were simply given the names of these patients and their diagnosis, and were then asked to pray every day for their healing and recovery.

What Dr. Bird discovered, when comparing the outcomes of each group, was that those who *were* prayed for did far better than those who were *not*. Everything from recovery rates, to hospital stays, to length of medication, and types of procedures needed, were all better for the group that was prayed *for*.

It’s significant to note here that none of the people who were being prayed for were ever *told* this, however. In other words, it wasn’t because of the power of suggestion or anything like it.

Finally, *Time Magazine* once ran an article that reported on the benefits of faith and church involvement. Among the findings:

- Heart-surgery patients who draw comfort from their religious faith have a significantly higher survival rate than those who do not.
- The blood pressure of people who attend church is lower than those who do not.
- People with religious faith who attend church regularly experience less depression than non-religious people. *And finally,*
- Suicide is four times higher among *non*-churchgoers than it is among churchgoers.

In other words, modern science and medicine have merely confirmed what James observed and encouraged nearly two thousand years ago. Namely, that there is a distinct health *benefit* to religious faith and practice.

Again, says James, if any are suffering, they should pray. If they are sick, they should call for their church leaders in order to receive the support and healing of the *larger* faith community...

And *because* the physical and the spiritual go hand-in-hand, and there *is* this close connection between prayer and healing, James, in verse 16, goes on to remind us that confession and forgiveness, *and healing*, are also closely related. That is, confession and forgiveness actually have healing properties of their own.

In fact, the *opposite* is even true. That is, it is entirely possible that a person who has *not* forgiven another could actually wind up being physically sick, or sick in spirit and attitude, or both.

There is the story about a young woman who had anemia, and the doctor who was working with her had tried to treat the illness for months without any success. Referrals were even made to *other* doctors. But still no success.

Finally, sometime later, another blood test was taken and *this* time, however, the results were different. The blood count had changed... and for the better. Now records had been kept of every previous visit and blood sample. Second-guessing himself because he could not find a *reason* for this change in the latest blood sample, the doctor was completely puzzled. The procedures were uniform and had been followed to the letter.

The doctor was still trying to find out if an error had somehow been made, when he returned to the patient and asked her, "Has anything out of the ordinary happened in your life since your last visit?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," she responded. "I have suddenly been able to forgive someone against whom I bore a nasty grudge. And, all at once, I felt that I could at last say, *yes*, to life!"

In other words, her entire mental attitude had changed when she found it within herself to forgive, and, with it, the very condition of her health had been changed as well! When her mind was healed, therefore, her body then simply followed along...

While forgiving is often hard for us, it is nevertheless *essential* to spiritual, mental, and even physical well-being. Noted religious author, Agnes Sanford, has said, "As we practice the work of forgiveness we discover more and more that forgiveness and healing are *one*."

And it was Marianne Williamson who wrote that, “The practice of forgiveness is our most important contribution to the healing of the world.”

However, there is nevertheless something important for us to remember. Certainly our prayers are necessary, to be *desired* even. But the *answer* to prayer is always in the hands of God, and God alone. (As a side note here, as Benjamin Franklin once wrote, “God heals, and the doctor takes the fees.”) You see, there is a critical point worth noting. And it’s simply this: there is a *difference* between being healed and being cured. What James promises here, in fact what the entire *Bible* promises, is healing; even, and especially, *when* there is no cure.

Sometimes, of course, the one for whom we pray *is* cured; sometimes even miraculously in ways that defy explanation or understanding. But *other times...* there *is* no cure, even despite our constant and fervent prayers. And yet... there is *always* healing. Or the potential for healing.

There is a story that powerfully illustrates this point. Some years ago, Tony Campolo was preaching one Sunday at a church out in Oregon. And, even though it had not previously been a practice of his, as the service was ending, he said to the congregation that if anyone wanted to remain afterwards for healing, he would be glad to pray for them. He didn’t expect much of a response, but to his surprise about 30 people stayed behind.

Now, he didn’t want to pray for their healing the way those TV preachers do. Instead, he wanted to really talk to them, and spend some time with them, and even hug and connect with each person as best he could. So that’s what he did.

He even anointed their heads with oil, that ancient Christian practice that we heard James refer to in this morning's reading. Well, doing all this for each person meant that it took well over an hour to pray with this group that had remained after the service. And what intrigued Tony was that not all of those who stayed afterwards for healing prayer actually *had* physical illnesses. One woman wanted healing for her marriage. Someone else asked healing for anger. And so it went.

Four days later, however, Tony got a telephone call, and the woman at the other end said, "Tony, on Sunday you prayed for my husband. He had cancer."

When Campolo heard the word "had" his heart jumped a beat. "*Had* cancer?" he asked.

The woman answered, "Well, he's dead now." And Tony's very first thought was, "A lot of good my prayer did."

Sensing this, the woman continued, "No, you don't understand. When my husband and I walked into that church on Sunday, he was angry with God. He had cancer and he knew that he was going to die soon, and he hated God for letting it happen. More than anything else, he wanted to see his grandchildren grow up.

"At night, he would lie in bed and curse God. It was horrible. And the angrier he got toward God, the meaner he was to everyone around him. It was almost unbearable to even be in the same room with him. His nastiness just kept getting worse and worse and worse.

“But then you laid hands on him on Sunday morning, and you prayed for him. And when he walked out of church, I knew there was something different. I could feel it. He was a different person. The last four days of our lives have been the *best* four days we’ve ever had together! We talked and laughed. We even sang hymns with each other. It was a good, good time.”

She paused, and then added something Tony found really profound. She said, “Tony, he wasn’t cured, but he *was* healed.” And Tony then hung up the phone knowing that he had just experienced something he would never forget about the healing power of God...

“The prayer of faith will *save* the sick,” wrote James. And “whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will *save* the sinner’s soul from death.”

There will always be miraculous cures. And we should rejoice whenever and wherever they take place. But more often than not, the *true* healing, the healing that *is* promised to us, is spiritual, not physical. And for that, we can give thanks and we can rejoice each and *every* day.

Amen.