

# PRAY, HEAL, RESCUE

## Sermon, September 26, 2021

### Text: James 5:13-20

Over the past month the Revised Common Lectionary has been taking us through the epistle of James, skipping over just a few sections here and there. We've read we are not only to hear the Word but we are to do it, because faith without works is a faith that DOESN'T work, and a faith that doesn't work is in reality no faith, it is dead faith. In Chapter Two James cautioned against showing partiality or favoritism, especially in the church, that we are to show everyone the same amount of dignity and respect and love we would show anyone else, regardless of age, class, wealth or ethnicity. We've also taken to heart James' sober reminders of the potentially destructive evils of that lethal weapon, the human tongue, when it's not used wisely, carefully, lovingly and constructively. And today we read some of his words in this final chapter of his letter to the church in Jerusalem addressing what I believe he considers three primary responsibilities of the church: To **PRAY**, **HEAL**, and **RESCUE**.

I'd like to take a look at these responsibilities in reverse order (*something I decided about 2 PM yesterday, thus reworking my entire sermon*), as I think it'll aid our understanding and ordering of our priorities. In our pew NIV Bibles, verse 19: *"My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins."* The third responsibility of the church James cites is *rescuing*, doing what we can to turn people around who have wandered from the truth and often into difficulty, and thus helping to save them from the very real, and often destructive, consequences of sin.

You may remember the late Reverend Clarence LaVaughn Franklin, former pastor of the New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan. The late Reverend Franklin is probably better known as the father of the Queen of Soul ... the poppa of pop star and soul queen Aretha Franklin. He was a celebrity of sorts in his own right; he was one of the first ministers to have sermons recorded on vinyl records for sale and distribution, and he also had something of a singing ability also recorded on vinyl long before daughter Aretha's R.E.S.P.E.C.T. hit the top of the record charts. (*A little aside: He passed away on my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, after being in a coma five years from being shot twice at point-blank range during a robbery at his Detroit home.*) His recordings are still available; three years ago I downloaded his sermon on the Parable of the Prodigal Son (*now on MP3 format; then it cost 99 cents on Amazon Music Prime; it's now on Amazon Prime for \$1.29 ... or "free," with a membership!*). He had a unique perspective on this familiar passage. He pointed out the Prodigal Son is one of three parables in Luke 15 where Jesus tells about lost things. First, Jesus tells of a lost sheep, which is lost **property**. Second, He tells of a lost coin, which is lost **money**. Third, He tells of a lost **child**. In the story of the lost sheep, a shepherd went back over his steps and searched in every valley until he had regained his lost property, the sheep. In the story of the lost coin, a woman swept under every bed and behind every door and in every corner until she had found her lost money, the coin. But in the story of the lost child, no one went out to look for him! Nobody went after him. They all just let him go until he came back. Rev. Franklin went on to make the wry observation that people will retrace every step and consult every lawyer in order to recover lost property. People will turn the house upside down, work extra shifts or launch special appeals in order to try and regain lost money. But too few will do what it takes to go out and try to regain and rescue their lost children ... and their lost friends, lost spouses, lost neighbors ... and that is what James specifically encourages us to do in this third responsibility of the church.

Now, being in a church community is about taking care of property and being careful with money; it is a conscientious and responsible thing to do to "rescue" the church property from physical decay and neglect. But as James reminds us, being in a church community is also about taking care of the human "property," about doing what we can to rescue those who are suffering from spiritual decay and neglect, about lovingly and tenderly and caringly going after those who have wandered from the church and from the faith, and very often into difficulty as a result. When people wander away, we tend to let them go and leave them alone. We tend to wait on them to come back before making a move toward them. We don't call or write notes or send cards. If they never "come to their senses," as did the Prodigal Son, well, we just leave them alone in the name of "tolerance" or "privacy." And sometimes with some people, that really is all we can do ... believe me, I know. But James encourages us to do what we can to search people out and bring them back when they've wandered away out of loving concern for their well being. We can do this in all sorts of ways ... we can send them notes, messages, texts, cards, give them calls, let them know they are missed, pray for them ... and help rescue them from the very real short and long term consequences of wandering away from what is true, right and good.

The second responsibility of the church cited by James is to **heal** ... to do what we can to care for the sick and the needy. Verse 14: *"Is any one among you sick? Let him call for elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven."* Just as a brief aside, and not all scholars agree on this, but in this particular context anointing with oil may have been a

common medical procedure; it may have been synonymous with “apply medication.”<sup>1</sup> Pray, **AND** give medicine! The Greek root word “save” used throughout the New Testament for salvation also carries the meaning to be made **well**, to be made **whole**, to be restored, to be healed. Salvation was not just about saving souls; it was and is about saving, salvaging, rescuing caring for *whole* people body, soul and spirit. In fact, the Latin stem of “salvation” is the word for “salve” or “healing ointment.” I could do a whole series of sermons on the topic of seemingly unanswered prayer; suffice it to say for now we know in our own experience that not every prayer, anointing or laying on of hands will result in a return to physical health, no matter how earnest or faith-full the prayer and/or the one(s) praying. Even Jesus Himself did not have all His prayers answered as He hoped (*see Gethsemane*), nor did He heal every sick person He encountered in the Gospels. And James isn’t promising physical healing will always come from our prayers. I believe the promise here is that the prayer of faith indeed has the power to save and raise up. In short, God will heal and make whole ... sometimes even in this life, this side of heaven! In the meantime, we are to be faithful to pray and apply the healing arts.

Jesus spent His three years of public ministry preaching, teaching and healing. The first generations of Christians continued to be known as preachers, teachers AND healers. Throughout history the church became the center for healing of all sorts. The early monasteries often had herb gardens, and would become the community pharmacy. The herbalist monks, the physicians of their day, tended body AND soul. When the deadly plague spread across all of Europe in the middle ages, there was no known cure, yet visiting the sick, tending to their spiritual needs as well as their physical comfort, was faithfully carried out by Christians, clergy and laity. When everyone else was running away and out of town, Christians stayed and offered the “salve” and “salvation” of Christ, though there was no guarantee they would not themselves be infected; indeed, many were. But they were heavenly minded people, who worshipped a God Who did not abandon or isolate Himself from this suffering world, but personally entered into this world’s pain and suffering to redeem it, thus demonstrating human life is worthy of saving.<sup>2</sup> So they did what they could to offer the “salve” and “salvation” of Christ. In fact, many Puritan pastors were trained in medicine. Pastor Cotton Mather of 17<sup>th</sup> century Boston is known even by secular historians as THE first significant figure in American medicine for his role in the development of the smallpox vaccination. As medicine continued to develop, it was Christians who took the lead in establishing hospitals to healing needs in the name of Christ. Today there is hardly a major American city that does not have a hospital with a Christian reference or denominational name in its title. In the German language, the word for “nurse” is *krankenschwester*, which literally translates as “sick sister.” It is an etymological, historical reference that the women who were known for working with and caring for the sick were primarily nuns, sisters. In short, the church has always been in the non-profit health care business; it’s only a relatively recent historic development that medicine became the profitable purview of corporations, government and politics ... but I won’t go there this morning.

So ... the third responsibility of the church is rescuing those who have wandered from the truth, the second responsibility is caring for the sick and the needy, and that brings us to the first and PRIMARY responsibility of the church, according to James, which is *praying*. The order is intentional, as if to emphatically say, “*Don’t even attempt the other two responsibilities until you get this one right!*” James asks in so many words, “*Are any among you in trouble? Pray! Are any among you cheerful? Pray! Are any sick? Pray! Have any sinned? Pray!*” Pray for yourselves, pray for one another, pray for your loved ones. There is a line I’ve used in many wedding homilies: “*There are nine words to repeat, and repeat often, in a successful relationship of marriage: ‘I was wrong, I am sorry, I love you.’*” Well, in a similar vein, there are THREE words (not nine) to repeat, and repeat often, in our prayers. In fact, we can effectively boil down all prayers to three basic petitions we should pray frequently and often. (1) “*Sorry!*” (2) “*Help!*” and (3) “*Thanks!*” Acknowledge our sinfulness, ask for help and divine intervention, and acknowledge our gratitude for God’s grace ... all acts of submissive, loving humility toward God.

*(The following was left out due to time constraints: I include it here: Prayer sets in motion the mystery of the created order to change us in ways that we are only beginning to understand. Just one quick example: Biologists tell us we are approximately 90% water. You know, it doesn’t take much to affect water for good or ill. Water is profoundly influenced and affected by its environment. It doesn’t take much to pollute water. If we are 90% water, then it stands to reason we are profoundly affected by influences in our environment, as well. It matters what we look at, it matters what we listen to, it matters where and how and with whom we spend our time. Our words, our thoughts, our environment, how and where and with whom we spend our time, what we look at, what we read or view, all these influences affect us on a deep physical and spiritual level in ways we don’t fully know and/or realize. It stands to reason that spending time in prayer, spending time in the presence of Purity and Holiness, profoundly affects us for the good, as does spending time in the presence of impurity profoundly affects us in so many negative ways. James tells us when we pray, we not only draw near to God, and God draws near to us ... and things change. If nothing else, WE change. Not to take the analogy too far, but bringing ourselves into the presence of God will make quite a splash in the water of our lives! It means the divine is going to touch you in transforming ways.)*

And as we read in chapter 4 last week, “*Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.*” James tells us when we pray, we not only draw near to God, and God draws near to us ... and things *change*. If nothing else, WE change. He will touch us in transforming ways ... equipping us to do our part to fulfill these three primary tasks of the church: Pray, Heal, Rescue.

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<sup>1</sup> For an interesting article on this topic, see <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/118-anointing-with-oil-james-5-14>

<sup>2</sup> We looked into this Easter 2020, see <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/so-heavenly-minded-that-we-are-earthly-good-2020.pdf>