

“The Prayer of Faith”

James 5:13- 20

1 October, 2006

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

James 5:13- 20

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are 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. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore 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. Elijah 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. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you 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.

Prayer.

I don’t know if any have noticed, but over the past year or so, I have included in the bulletin a statement of our four, core values. Can you find them? Right there, on the back cover, after the greeting in the announcements, you will read our vision, followed by this statement: “Our four core values are worship, music, prayer, and mission.”

Our core values came from an afternoon I spent with our Lay Leader, Sharon Boyd, in her kitchen about four summers ago. When our parish first decided to go our own way, we felt that it was important to reaffirm our vision, and to identify the leading core values, the most important characteristics, of our community of faith. We simply observed what was already happening, and put our observations into words on paper.

Worship, music, prayer, and mission – each of these four are central, the core of our foundation as disciples of Jesus Christ, for a people we know as Zion. Worship is purposeful and meaningful. Our music is an expression of our gifts. Missions are a sign of God’s grace to us, and considered a privilege to extend to those in need, all in the name of Christ. And then there is prayer.

To be a member or friend of Zion is to know that we are a prayerful, praying family. We heed these words of James, praying in all seasons, in every circumstance, for every possible purpose. We pray because Jesus tells us to. We pray because we are assured

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that it makes a difference. We know that it makes a difference to pray because we have a lifetime of experience that validates our belief.

We pray not knowing the outcome, yet finding rest and assurance that when the issue is turned over to God, then God will abide, in God's time, in God's season, and according to God's own will. To ask for healing may result in a cure; but it may also result in the repair of a torn relationship, the mending of broken community, the re-orientation and reconnection to a foundational faith. Or the result may even be shrouded in complete mystery, only coming to fruition according to God's larger plan apart from our future experience or long after we are gone.

Those suffering, cheerful, or sick are cited by James as being in need of prayer. Clergy and lay elders of the church are encouraged to pray over the sick, anointing them on the forehead with oil. Sinners are told to make a prayer of confession. Tell God; though He already knows, because it is the act of telling through which sin is made real, repentance can take hold, God can work to start the process of forgiveness, and healing can begin.

James tells us "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven."ⁱ The prayer of faith is praying in the gospel's tradition – confident that the power of prayer can heal individuals from their illness and communities from their alienation.ⁱⁱ This power is a reminder of the confidence Jesus had, as he preached, taught, healed, cast out demons, and raised the dead.

When we pray with confidence, we unleash the power of God, that the Lord may wield His power and purpose according to His will. We do not control it; rather, it works through us, like lightening down a kite string, so that God's hand continues to touch and heal in our world today. Confident prayer forgives sins and raises the dead; and it also requires us to release the power of our judgmental selves, and return all authority for judgment to our Divine Savior, Master, Creator, and Friend. Confident prayer does as much self-cleansing as it does healing and forgiving.

Just when did we begin to think that any one of us is holier than Thou? When did we start to believe that our meager attempts at righteous living hide the fact that down deep inside, every one of us are sinners, unworthy of even the morsels that fall under our Savior's feet? The prayer of faith, praying with the confidence of Christ, begins with putting down our bricks, calling on our neighbors, inviting them to join us, to come over for a visit to our house made of glass.

Dearly beloved, I am reminded of the youthful lion, Simba, from the Lion King, who misses his deceased father, Mufasa. He looks up into the night sky and sings how he misses him, how he has lost his way back home. When I think of prayer, I think of the word "home," just the same way Simba longs for his father. Prayer brings us home by

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connecting us with our heavenly Father, guiding us towards Jesus Christ, leading us ultimately towards our final destination, our completed journey into God's eternal presence.

In many ways our Holy Communion table here today also symbolizes returning home; returning home to the Sacraments, returning home to the Body of Christ, returning home to Zion, returning home with a unified voice and heart this World Communion Sunday. The Great Thanksgiving over the Bread and the Cup is our prayer of faith, words spoken in confidence, that addresses that which cannot be spoken; that which can only be known.

God longs to hear you pray, to hear you speak with your lips, your mind, your heart, or with your hands. God longs to be recognized for His presence in your life, even though our God knows our needs even before we ask. God yearns for us to pray with faith; with the confidence of Jesus Christ; that the sinner may be forgiven, the dead may be resurrected, and that each of us might, one day, be welcomed home into God's eternal kingdom.

My beloved, let the praying - and the feasting - begin! Amen.

ⁱ James 5:14, NRSV.

ⁱⁱ New Interpreter's Bible A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, V XII, pg. 223.