

The Call to Prayer James 5:13-20

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost/ 26th September 2021

It's probably the one thing people of faith struggle with most: *prayer*. Through surveys and conversations over the years at CPC, our adult education committee has received countless requests for more classes or studies on prayer. We all know that prayer is at the heart of the life of faith, but we all know that sometimes—often—prayer does not come easy to us. Perhaps we have high expectations for ourselves, and we judge ourselves for not living up to them. Maybe we just don't know how to pray. Maybe no one really taught you how. There's the obstacle of time, making the time to pray. How much time should be given to prayer, daily, weekly? The reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) once said, "I have so much to do [today] that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer."

And then there are all the internal obstacles that prevent us from praying, such as insecurity and fear that we're doing it wrong. How should one pray? Is there a correct way to pray? A colleague back in New Jersey said years ago at a clergy retreat that prayer mainly consists of giving God a lot of bad advice. There's a lot of truth there, but it's not the full story. It's more than that. One obstacle might be feeling anxious in the presence of God, feeling anxious about silence. Maybe there's the fear, conscious or unconscious, that God might actually say something, might actually do something in prayer, that God might actually be encountered, and that God might ask something new, different, difficult from you.

When it comes to prayer, we are all novices, beginners. We're all disciples, meaning students, and we have much to learn. We all need help—pastors included. When I hear the disciples asking Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1), I can resonate with that. The great Howard Thurman (1899-1981) said that he was "always impressed by the fact...that the only thing that the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to do was to pray."¹ I need help. I pray and know the power and effectiveness of prayer, but I wouldn't call myself a "prayer warrior." I know people who spend hours at intercessory prayer, who pray over every aspect of their lives, praying the newspaper—and the news these days requires a lot of prayer. I don't do that. I pray and know the power of prayer. Prayer changes things. It makes a difference in my life. I pray regularly, but I don't have a set pattern or daily rhythm or a set-schedule. I know people who go into their "prayer closets"—perhaps you have one—a special place in your home where you go to be with God. I don't have such a place. I like to walk and pray. And I prefer silent prayer than offering up a lot of words. As a pastor, I'm surrounded by a lot words and use a lot of words. I prefer entering into silence. Still, I have shelves of prayer books, books on the theology of prayer, the history of prayer, the spirituality of prayer, you name it, but I wouldn't say I'm an expert. Many of these books were purchased during a particular season in my life when I said, "I need to deepen my prayer life." But then life gets in the way of my plans, and the half-read book is placed on the shelf until the next season comes around when I say, "I need to deepen my prayer life," and I buy another book. It's a great way to build a library! But it's a lousy way to learn how to pray.

Actually, I'm a little suspicious of all the books about prayer on the market these days, books about the secrets of prayer, books on the techniques and methods of prayers, or yet another collection of someone else's prayers. And, yes, I confess this as we're about to begin a congregation-wide study of prayer.² Theory, structure, skills, methods, tools for praying are

important. We have much to learn from the Christian mystical and contemplative traditions in the church. Presbyterians have much to learn from Roman Catholics in this regard. Still, Jesus didn't need prayer manuals or prayers written by others. He did know the psalms, of course. Jesus—*prayed*. He didn't learn about prayer, *he prayed*. He didn't worry about deepening his prayer life, *he prayed*. He got on with it. For Jesus, prayer wasn't an option; it wasn't something he got around to after the end of a busy day or something he turned to in a time of crisis. My guess is he never went very long between prayers; it was a constant in his life. In Mark's gospel, in particular, there is a clear rhythm of prayer and ministry, prayer and ministry, throughout his life. Jesus prayed. He just did it. A lot. His disciples knew he prayed; he was always going off by himself to pray. They knew how central it was in his life, in his ministry. They didn't know how to do it. So one day they asked him. And he told them—tells us. “This is how you pray... Our Father, who art in heaven...” (Matthew 6:9-13).

Yes, he just prayed. He got on with it. And we need to do the same. The letter of James doesn't really tell us how to pray, it just calls us to pray, to remember to pray. Just do it. If you're suffering—and who isn't suffering in one way or the other these days?—pray. If you're cheerful, if you're happy, sing songs of praise, sing psalms, sing your prayers. If there are any sick among you, then gather the elders—*presbuteroi*—gather the presbyters, the elders around you and have them pray. The elders of the church shall engage in prayer. Anoint the sick with oil in the name of the Lord. Pray for healing, become an agent of healing.

James writes, “The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven” (James 5:15). That's a tough sentence to take in. Does it really promise that the prayer of the faithful will always save the sick? How many times have we prayed for healing for someone, and it was not realized? Did you then, perhaps, blame yourself because you didn't pray correctly or pray long enough, with enough faith and fervor and truth? Perhaps you thought the prayer didn't work because you had an unconfessed sin in your life. I used to think this when I was a teenager. This is where the praying for healing becomes tricky. What should we pray for? Should we pray for healing? Yes, sometimes...often...trusting in God to do the impossible. But what is healing? There might not be physical healing but there could be spiritual healing, psychological healing, a healing of the heart but not the body. And, yes, sometimes bodies are healed, but not always as we know.

Then there's this interesting verse, “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” (James 5:16). James seems to be calling us to a particular way of life in the church where we pray for one another, confess our sins, acknowledge our faults and failings, becoming vulnerable to and with another, developing a rich prayer life, a deep connection with the Lord, so that when you are asked to pray for someone, the ones who are suffering, the ones who are sick, the ones who are rejoicing, you will know how to pray for them, you will be prepared, you will be ready. “For the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” (James 5:16). For the prayer of the righteous—meaning, not the morally perfect or sinless, but those who are in a right relationship with the Lord, trusting in the grace and goodness of God—is powerful and effective.

There's no doubt that for James—as well as for Jesus and countless others before him—prayer is powerful. It is effective. Something happens. There is a power available to us and it changes us and through it we are changed. Prayer has the capacity to change and heal the world. Before the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, long before that historic day, Christians gathered together for prayer in both East and West Germany, for decades and prayed for the wall to come down. We must never underestimate the influence of people who gather in prayer, often in the

midst of persecution and times of enormous pain and suffering, who pray for the world, pray for change, pray for the vulnerable, the refugee, the exile, the harassed and excluded, these prayer warriors for social justice, for fairness, for rights, for equality, for reconciliation, for wholeness, for salvation. Prayer is effective. Don't ask me how it works...it just does.

There is power in prayer. The important point here is to remember that the power is not in us. Prayer is not a tool we use to get the things that we want. "Thy will be done," not my will or your will. We don't have the power. But the power moves through us. And perhaps, if we're honest, that's what scares us most about prayer, that we will tap into something that is just too much for us bear.

I like to think of prayer and the life of faith in this way. Think of the electricity right now running through the walls of your home. It's there, invisible, available to us all the time. But in order for the television to work, and the computer, in order for you be on this Zoom call, you had to plug it in. You have to connect to the power. Prayer is the connection that opens you to the heart of the Living God and, then, allows you to connect to the heart of your neighbor and to the hopes, dreams, and needs of the world. Only connect. Plug in. Just do it. *May it be so.*



This sermon was preached at a joint service of Knox Presbyterian Church and Catonsville Presbyterian Church via Zoom.

¹ Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (1977). For more on Thurman see Paul Harvey, *Howard Thurman and the Disinherited: A Religious Biography* (Eerdmans, 2020).

² James Martin, S. J., *Learning to Pray: A Guide for Everyone* (Harper One, 2021).