

Hayward United Methodist Church

Pastor Samuel's Message for the Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost, September 26, 2021

“Are Any Among You Suffering?”

Text: James 5:13-20

Gospel Reading: James 5:13-15, 17-18 (NRSV)

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. 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.

Prayer for Illumination (UMH 6)

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that, as the Scriptures are read and your word proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Anointing the sick with oil is found only in the Letter of James. It is not found elsewhere in the New Testament. Probably it was practiced in some churches in early Christianity. Anointing represents God's presence. In the Old Testament the kings were anointed with oil. The kings were supposed to show God's presence through administering peace and justice. Here oil serves as a symbol of God's healing. Jesus used mean means such as applying clay on people's eyes to effect healing. It is God who brings about healing through the means. There were times when Jesus did not use any means to heal. He simply spoke a word and people were healed.

The Letter of James claims to have been written by James, the brother of the Lord. James was not a believer during the ministry of Jesus. Probably he came to believe Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God after his resurrection. James became one of the pillars of the Jerusalem church. Here James is not writing to any

particular church. He is writing to Christians in Dispersion. Probably he had in mind Christians living elsewhere. He seems to have intended his letter for future Christians as well.

First, James talks about the reality of life. James asks: Are any among you suffering? People do suffer everywhere. There are many factors that contribute to people's sufferings. People suffer because of natural calamities. They lose their loved ones. They experience hardships. People suffer because of pandemic. How many people have lost due to pandemic since last year? How many have lost their jobs? How many are still suffering? People do not have any means to live a good life. How many people are homeless? Human suffering is countless. Sometimes people suffer inwardly. They do not want to share it with others. There are unspeakable suffering.

Suffering is also related to sickness. James asks: Are any among you sick? The healing stories of Jesus talk about various sickness. Jesus healed the lepers. Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law of fever. Jesus healed the blind. Jesus healed the deaf. Jesus cast out demons. Jesus even raised the dead back to life. Jesus healed a multitude of people. He brought the physical healing to the crowd. It shows that sickness is part of suffering.

Jesus took the human suffering seriously. Otherwise he would not healed the people. He would have simply preached the gospel. Healing the sick was part of Jesus's ministry. Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Luke 5:31). Jesus had compassion for the people because he saw people suffering from various sickness. He demonstrated God's love for them by healing them. He himself endured the suffering on behalf of the people. He suffered on the cross. As God's Son he could have avoided the cross. He came to the cross willingly to atone the sins of the people. By his suffering on the cross he brought redemption to the whole world.

James acknowledges the reality of suffering. No one can escape human suffering. It is part of life. Sometimes it comes unexpectedly. In the Old Testament, Job endured unspeakable suffering. It came to him as a surprise. He lost all his children. He lost his wealth. He lost his health. He remained faithful to God. The story of Job teaches that suffering comes from nowhere.

Suddenly people find themselves in the midst of suffering. Suffering may test our faith. Suffering may also strengthen our faith. Jesus was tested on the cross to come down and avoid suffering. But Jesus trusted God and entrusted his life to God. God did not abandon Jesus. In fact God raised Jesus back to life on the third day. He conquered suffering by suffering on the cross. He emerged victorious on the third day.

Second, James talks about healing through prayer. James says that if anyone is suffering they should pray. If anyone is sick, they should call for the elders of the church and pray over the sick, anointing with oil. James emphasizes prayer as a means to overcome suffering and sickness. Jesus went to the desert many times to pray. He even prayed before he healed the sick. He prayed before he raised Lazarus to life. Through prayer Jesus invoked the power of God. Jesus led a prayerful life. He taught the disciples how to pray. The Lord's Prayer came out of that. Without prayer one can not please God.

The disciples stayed in Jerusalem and were praying. Then the Holy Spirit came upon them. The power of disciples enabled them to minister to the people. Just like Jesus, the disciples also healed many who were sick. The power of prayer is still available to those who seek the Lord. James encourages us to pray for one another so that we might be healed. Through prayer we are connected to God and to one another. It is so important that we pray for others who are suffering. Even Job prayed for his three friends. Jesus prayed for his enemies on the cross. He asked God to forgive his enemies so that they might avoid the judgment of God.

James goes on to talk about the example of Elijah who was a man of prayer. Even though Elijah was a great prophet, he was like one of us. He himself endured suffering for speaking to authorities. But he prayed fervently that it might not rain for three and half years and it did not rain on the earth. Again, he prayed for rain and rain poured on the earth. James seems to emphasize fervent prayer. Probably Elijah prayed everyday. He never gave up prayer. He communicated to God each and everyday.

How many times do we pray? Do we pray occasionally? Do we pray fervently like Elijah? God wants us to pray continually even when God seems to be distant. Do we remain persistent in prayer? The apostle Paul had some physical sickness.

He did not pray just for one time. But he prayed for three times. That means he prayed three times a day. We don't know how long he was praying for. Probably he was praying for many years even when God did not answer his prayers. One day God answered his prayers. God said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Paul had to wait on God for many years until he received grace from God to go on with his life.

What are we praying for and how long are we praying for? One day God is going to answer our prayers. One day God is going to heal our suffering and sickness. There is no doubt that we will experience the miracle of healing coming from the hands of God. The biblical stories give us encouragement that how the people back then received God's healing and how they remained in fervent prayer even when God seemed to be silent.

James probably experienced the power of prayer. He writes from his experience. Probably he prayed to God for various needs. He came to God in fervent prayer. God did heal James. God did answer James's prayer. God did meet the needs of the people for whom James prayed. He was bold to testify that the prayer of the righteous believers is powerful and effective. James learned a secret to a life of happiness and peace.

God can put an end to our suffering. God can heal all our sickness. God can meet all our needs. It is only through prayer that we can approach the throne of God. God has all the power to do miracles in our life. God wants to come to God in fervent prayer. What are you waiting for? What is that you want God to heal? Just bring everything to God in prayer and you will experience divine healing.

God Bless.

Pastor Samuel

Let's say the Benediction together:
The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with us all. Amen.