
Healing Prayer
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
April 25, 2021
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on James 3:13-38 and James 5:13-18

If you've come here before, you know that during these reflections we often deal with scriptural passages that are a bit unclear and hard to understand. Part of the fascination I find in ministry is exploring and unpacking those unclear or ambiguous passages in the Bible. And then helping to bring the meaning of those texts into our current reality. And it's a real privilege to be able to do that every week.

So I have to wonder if anyone else here was surprised by the passages we just read from James. Because those texts, and in particular, the second piece from James 5, seem to require no explanation whatsoever. "If any among you are suffering, they should pray. If any among you are sick, they should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them." Now really - is any of that hard to understand? Is any of that even hard to do? No, not really. Wait - do we have elders in this church? Well of course we do. Not in the official and traditional sense where people were formally elected as Elders. But this congregation has many dedicated pray-ers, including our prayer group. And we have many dedicated care-ers too. People who deeply care for each other. We have a pastoral care committee made up of compassionate people. We have our board which makes up the "spiritual leadership" of this church. We have other members that we know and trust. And people certainly approach me for various types of support, including prayer. Of course we have elders in a general sense. And yet - how often do you have something on your heart and you approach an elder of this church to pray with you?

[image: classic man praying]

I remember seeing this done literally during a worship service. But not in a United Church. When our son, Ian, was at McMaster University, he participated in an on-campus church. Almost all of the people who attended the church were students. But for Easter Sundays, they made a real effort to invite the student's parents to their service. The service was at 5 pm, to allow guests to participate in their own services too. Marjorie and

I gladly went. I won't unpack the whole event here, but I was struck by how they ended the service. At the end of the service they announced that all around the outside of the sanctuary were people wearing brightly coloured shirts. And that if anyone wanted prayer, they should feel free to approach anyone in a bright shirt for prayer as they left the sanctuary. That church had people stationed around the room for the sole purpose of praying with people as they left. They even announced this offer for prayer after telling people they could go downstairs for a free dinner, so I knew they were serious about prayer.

[image: prayer outside]

But before we get too deep, what is prayer anyway? Prayer, I suggest, is any activity that helps us feel connected to God. Prayer is often thought of as a conversation between you and God. But the word "conversation" is a bit limiting. The word "conversation" implies speaking, and words. And prayer can certainly involve words. But prayer can also involve silence. Prayer can even include physical activity. Some people do not like words. Some people do not like silence. And so some people feel more connected to God during physical activities, like gardening.

[image: bicycle spirituality]

You will not be surprised that I once read a book about the spirituality of riding a bicycle. Marjorie has a book about the spirituality of knitting. On Sunday mornings, we usually rely on prayer using a combination of words and silence. But there are many other forms of prayer.

The church in its wisdom has categories for prayers. Some categories are structural. For example, "responsive prayer" simply means that we echo the conversation back and forth between the leader and the congregation. Since I've been here, that's the most common form we've used during the Prayers of the People. Some prayers are defined by their purpose. For example, prayers to open or close a service. We have prayers of approach, and lament. I don't know the technical terms for this one, but one common form of prayer is simply a very long sigh. Sometimes in life, a very long sigh is much more appropriate than any words we can come up with.

If we restrict our conversation about prayer to only verbal prayers - with words,

then globally, the most popular form of prayer is “intercessory prayer”. Intercession means making a petition for God to intercede in our lives. Or in common language. “Asking God for something”. Intercessory prayer is therefore unique in one sense. If you pray and ask God for something, then you open yourself up to the possibility of seeing the change you wanted - or not. You open yourself up to wondering if your request was reasonable. You open yourself up to wondering if God is even listening. Does prayer work? After many years of prayer, I can only say that with intercessory prayer, it depends on your expectations.

Praying for change is in many ways like hoping for any kind of change. While it might be easy for us to name 100 things that we think other people should change, it is sometimes harder for us to recognize what we can change ourselves. And in fact, what we already have the power to change ourselves. Mother Teresa expressed this well in her approach to prayer.

[image: mother teresa]

“I used to pray that God would feed the hungry, or do this or that, but now I pray that God will guide me to do whatever I’m supposed to do, what I can do. I used to pray for answers, but now I’m praying for strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us and we change things”, ... Mother Teresa.

The National Prayer Bank is a web site where people submit, and respond, to prayer requests. When I last checked, they had handled over 4 million prayers. So I did a bit of research to see what people - on that web site at least - pray about.

Here are some actual examples of prayer requests on the web site:

- “I pray that Bill might find comfort and wisdom in a right relationship with the Lord and saviour Jesus Christ”.
- “I need a financial miracle”
- “Pray for my sister who loves the Lord to pass her Nurse Practitioner Exam.”
- “Asking prayers for me and my wife to be completely debt free and the money to pay all our weekly financial obligations.”
- “Pray for my mom and dad who have ailments that they are healed. That I will be a daughter who honours them and takes care of them effortlessly. I am a full-time

care giver of my mom. It is very burdensome and I dread to go because of unresolved issues when I was younger. Please pray for my soul so that I am free to also intercede for those the Lord has placed in His will for my purpose to come to fruition.”

- “Not being able to get pregnant has devastated me. I’m beginning to feel like God is punishing me for some unknown reason and that in some strange way, He is enjoying my pain. I know he’s not punishing me and I know my pain causes HIM pain, so why won’t He let it happen? Why do teenagers and drug addicts get to have a child but I do not? Please pray for healing my ovaries and spiritual renewal.”
- “Please pray for me that I will quit smoking. I have been praying about this for years and I continue to smoke. Please pray that God will take the desire for me to smoke away and that He will help me to quit.”
- “God please supply my rent today and money for all of my bills. God please help me with my life, bring restoration to me for all the things I lost.”

I find the experience of reading other people’s prayers to be very humbling actually. Some prayers made me wonder about the theology of the person making the request. But many were very thoughtful and seemed to reflect a much deeper understanding of the human condition. Yes, it’s true that some of the requests seem childish and selfish. But many made me wish I could sit down and have a coffee with the individual making the request. I encourage you to read through prayer requests online yourself and see what you can learn about prayer and your own faith.

It’s easy to be critical of some of these prayers. I can’t read the prayer, “Pray for my sister who loves the Lord to pass her Nurse Practitioner Exam.” without wondering if at the same time a patient awaiting surgery was praying “that the hospital staff would be competent and did not just scrape through their exams”. But at least these people are willing to verbalize their prayers and their hopes. My experience in the United Church of Canada is that we prefer not to share our prayers - in general. Since I’ve come here, most weeks during the “Prayers of the People”, I make intentional space for all of us to share

our own prayers - out loud or not. And during the 6 weeks we worshipped together in the sanctuary before we closed for the pandemic, I don't recall hearing any verbal prayers from the congregation. I hope you know that I'm never judging any of you during prayers. Whether you voice your prayers or simply think them. It's all good and it's all prayer.

Interestingly, prayer is one of the back-bones of most online churches. You might think of online church as a product of the COVID pandemic, but online church pre-dates our pandemic.

[image: st pixels 1]

My favourite online church at one time was "St. Pixels". It was not only online, but virtual. And it began in 2004 - 17 years ago. Virtual churches offer many elements of traditional church. But the feature I used most often was the "prayer room". At the scheduled time I would enter the prayer space, to be present with other people around the world. Sessions lasted about 20 minutes. People could type messages to the group. But I really preferred the times of intentionally silent prayer. Nobody typed anything at all during silent prayer time. But when the 20 minutes were over there was an outpouring from people expressing gratitude for the presence of each other during our time of silent prayer. All space can be sacred space - even virtual space.

[image: st pixels 2]

St. Pixels also had a 3D virtual sanctuary where people could go for regular worship services. People went as avatars. You even got to walk down the aisle and pick your seat. But that's another story.

[image: st pixels 3]

I realize that some of us here don't really enjoy online church. You might find it hard to imagine logging onto a web site and entering a virtual "space" just to be connected to other people you don't know - in silence. But I found it very powerful and special. Perhaps sometimes it is easier to engage with strangers. Anonymity can distance people, but it can also bring people together in ways that can be quite meaningful.

[image: st pixels 4]

Anonymous prayer has a valid purpose. But our reading from James pushes the

opposite idea. Speaking to a congregation, James does not just say we should pray for healing. He goes on, “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.” Ok - well now I think I see the problem here. “Confess your sins to one another” really doesn't sound very ... United Churchy. And yet, according to James, that is in fact a pathway to healing. So here's a question. James was just James, we don't have to believe him. Martin Luther thought that the book of James didn't even belong in the Bible. So the question is - do we believe that our own healing is dependent on our willingness to be open and vulnerable with each other?

[image: st pixels 5]

What does James mean by “confess your sins to each other”? Isn't that a Catholic thing? Well, formal confession to a priest in a booth is a Catholic thing, yes. But the concept - and the need for confession - is universal. It's part of the human condition. Confession requires openness. Confession requires vulnerability and some degree of acceptance of lack of control over one's own life. I myself received countless “confessions” while visiting inmates in prison. Not that the word “confession” would ever have been used, but vulnerable people who need healing automatically utilize confession as part of their healing. There is no healing without truth. And confession is simply naming your own truth.

[centre image]

James shares with us a vision for a community of people who are honest with one another. People who share their lives with each other. Of church as a place where deep healing can be found. But in my experience, when people need healing, we sometimes actually stay away from church altogether. We often stay away from family and friends too. Because we don't want to be seen in a weakened state. Or because we don't want other people to see us as needy. Or because we don't want other people to see us cry. Or because we don't want other people to pity us. Or because we just don't want to be vulnerable.

But James says that our healing comes from being part of a church community. Bringing our whole selves into that community. Which includes the “good”, the “bad”, and the “indifferent”. Sharing our lives with each other, praying together, and finding

healing - together.

What do you think of that vision of church community? A community of sharing and caring? For me, it raises a question. The question is - that church that James describes - could that church be Sydenham-Heritage United Church?

Amen.