

The sacrament of Healing
Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Healing Prayer Service
September 27, 2015
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Text: James 5:13-20

It has felt to me this week like it is a risky thing to have a healing prayer service as part of our liturgy today. I don't mean to sound melodramatic or even self-important – but it truly does feel like such a service is fraught with danger. Let me tell you a little story of why. At the first congregation I served, 25 years ago in Phoenix, there was a longtime leader of the church named Betty – she was a retired schoolteacher and still kind of looked like she was from the 50s – she was wonderful: a faithful and wise and generous and gifted and enthusiastic member of this small Phoenix church, and she was really the glue that held it together. A few years before I started there as a pastor, Betty's husband had died after an illness – Betty dearly loved and missed him. At some point as I was her pastor there, Betty shared with me that she carried a great burden that she had failed her husband by not praying the right way for his getting better – that there was something displeasing to God about her or her prayers that left the prayers unanswered - Betty thought this way because of what she perceived she had heard at various times from the church and from Christian friends - and Betty was left deeply wounded by this. As a young pastor, Betty's story made a deep impression on me – it made clear the intensity of faith and feeling, uncertainty and pain, around issues of prayer and healing. I will tell you later what I said to Betty – but for now I hope you can understand why I speak of danger in regards to a service of healing prayer.

Although, to find the same kind of danger, we could simply turn to the passage we heard today from the Epistle of James – here is a summary: 'suffering? - pray; cheerful? – praise; sick? have the elders pray and anoint with oil; prayers save the sick; prayers forgive the sinner; so confess, pray, be healed; the prayer of the righteous is powerful.' Hearing that, it's easy to make some very direct links between prayer and direct healing, and even links between sin and forgiveness and healing. And if that's what it says, then shouldn't I say that too? Well, let me say a few things about what is going on here; and about what is not going on here – and then we'll see.

The book of James is all about community – in the passages from James that have been read in our worship the past few weeks (and in the verses that the lectionary skipped over just before today’s passage, verses on the dangers of wealth and evils of oppression of the poor), the concerns of James are about how speech and action directly impact the well-being of those around you – as a force for good or for harm. And these issues are always addressed on a communal, group, level – not just individual issues or piety – but how a community of faith is to be a faithful community. So then when we get to James 5, we come upon just a few more little things to talk about: suffering – joy – sickness – sin – prayer – healing - forgiveness...it’s quite a list and quite a mix of realities and issues – and it would seem that James could say a lot more about these things (and we could say that Scripture DOES say a lot more about these things). But what I think is most important to see here is the communal value that James expresses – community is the thread that weaves all of these things together. Suffering – pray together; joyful – pray together; sick – anoint together; sin – confess and pray together...everything is plural here, every noun and verb...these are all communal issues and actions. What we are told here is that to be a part of a church is to be, must be, a place where suffering, joy, sickness and sin are shared with one another and with our God – and that to do so as a community breathes into us the presence and power of our Risen Lord – to pray about these things as a community is to be touched by the life-giving presence of our God. That’s really what I think this says.

But if you are a careful Bible reader – Betty in Phoenix was – you might also point out to me that it says things about prayers saving the sick and the prayer of the righteous being effective. What do I say about that? Well, one thing I say, is that I do not think the Apostle James was naïve or simplistic. I am certain that James knew of plenty of times when faithful people did not become well, and that in those situations he would not “blame” the person or prayer. And beyond that I can extrapolate that there are many diminishment of human capacity that will not be cured or changed – to be very personal, I have a brother who is mentally handicapped...that is not going to be cured. And to extrapolate even further, prayers for healing do not deny this reality for all of us: none of us are getting out of this alive. What I am trying to say is that for us to focus on questions

of who or how someone is healed in a particular situation loses track of the deeper issues that are at stake in our lives, for us as a community, for our community and world – which is how suffering and sin (and I suppose also abundance) divide us from one another and from God. I do not have the answers for who and how with a direct healing – perhaps I should, but I don't – but I'll tell you I think there's more important things. Because what I do know is that James says to all of these circumstances: 'pray'; and that is not some sort of weak step-back from the impact of prayer but a profound step towards claiming the Risen Christ as having to do with all of the realities of our lives.

And a particular part of this passage has helped me to see that, which is the mention of the anointing oil: 'the sick should have the Elders come and pray and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.' This early Christian community connected to Judaism would know about oil – oil was a symbol for special occasions, used to anoint kings and priests and for sacrifice to God; and what oil did is mark something as holy. But what James does here is take this marking of oil that was special just for a few, and says it is for the whole community - all are included in this anointing of the holy. Because what holy has to do with is the presence of God, of God's Spirit, of the goodness and power of God the giver of life. So to be marked with oil is to receive an outer symbol of an inner reality (which is sometimes called a sacrament) – that the presence of God claims your life as belonging to God; it is the physical manifestation of the spiritual reality that you cannot be separated from the living God. And so what I see is this symbol of oil making sense of all that is going on in this passage – as it speaks of suffering and joy and sickness and sin – all are circumstances which are marked in prayer as holy – all are touched by the presence of our Risen Lord.

Let me tell you one other story, and then say a bit more about Betty. I was taught about prayer, healing prayer, by a member of Hope Church. This person's spouse died, and in the grief of this great loss, a friend of the family expressed that she had been praying for them for a long time – and the reply of this person whose spouse had died was: "well, those prayers sure worked –

the strength and comfort we have felt has been miraculous.” It was the most sincere and substantive thing I have heard in a while. And I think it’s what I believe about prayer and healing.

You see, what I said back then many years ago to Betty was, ‘first of all – I think all that stuff about you not praying right and that you failed your husband: that’s just bunk – it’s awful and hurtful, and that is a burden you are not meant to carry. And even more than that – I believe your prayers WERE effective, were answered, were a source of healing. I can only imagine the strength and comfort, the hope and joy your husband received from your love and care – God gave you the strength to do that, to be that; I can only imagine the comfort and hope you had in knowing your husband was held in God’s presence and grace. And here you are, Betty, continuing to be a source of care and strength to others – you are an answer to my prayers – I see God’s presence in you.’

As a pastor, a Christian, a part of this community, as one who suffers and sins, knows joy and needs healing, that is still what I say. I do not want the risk of how prayers for healing can be misconstrued to keep us from the sacramental, holy power of what we are given. We are called to share our burdens and joys together, in community with one another, and in community with our Risen Lord. To do so is to be claimed by the holy touch of God and to proclaim that nothing can separate us from God’s grace and peace. And it sends us to be people of faith and to touch the brokenness around us with God’s healing grace. Is there suffering, joy, sickness, sin among us? – let the Elders anoint us so that we may be healed by God and be healing for others. Thanks be to God. AMEN.