

"Just Faith"

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
September 23, 2018**

Old Testament Lesson: 2 Chronicles 7:12-16

New Testament Lesson: James 5:13-20

Prayer For Illumination:

Lord God, we don't want to be so caught up in our own agendas that we miss your presence here among us. We don't want to sing and pray and read your word just to check those things off our to-do list. We want to meet you, Lord. We want to hear from you, to experience you, to walk away from this place changed because we have been in your presence. So take this gathering, and make it yours. We are so thankful that you are here with us. Amen.

Writer Myron Bloy tells of a small group of hunters isolated in the mountains separating Uganda, the Sudan, and Kenya.¹ In creating a national game reserve, the government drove the tribe from their hunting grounds and relocated them to an unused stretch of land. They were told it was theirs free and clear and they should settle there, farm the land and raise their families. But they no tools and no experience or knowledge of farming. So now this community of once prosperous and daring hunters has deteriorated to scattered bands of hostile people whose only goal is individual survival.

Encountering such insurmountable struggles, the fabric of their community unraveled as they lost touch with such things as compassion, kindness, and mutual care and concern – even for their own children. They can and do steal food from the mouths of their parents, abandon infants to fend for themselves, and leave the old, sick and crippled to die alone. This shift from a healthy, thriving self-sustaining community occurred in less than three generations.

Myron Bloy tells this story to illustrate the difficulty that human beings face maintaining community while under extreme pressure. It takes something for us to show mutual love for one another, altruistic care and concern, and self-sacrifice for the sake of others. It takes a community – not built on successful hunting – but rather, a community built on faith.

Bloy concludes with these words, saying, "I want also to suggest that each one of us is far more ready, under similar pressures, to adopt the behavior of (this tribe of hunters and their

¹ Myron B. Bloy Jr., "Faith communities in the academic world," *Cross Currents*, Winter 1993, 437, citing anthropologist Colin Turnbull, in his book, *The Mountain People*.

families). What would it take for us as a people to lose touch with our sense of compassion, kindness, care and concern? Do we even now see this type of abandonment happening in our country, our neighborhoods, our families? Scary thought.

So today, I'd like us to reaffirm our connection to this community of faith in a real and lasting way. I want us to pray for one another in the spirit of mutual care and concern. Our New Testament lesson today is all about prayer. When the Apostle James wrote his letter, he was laying a firm foundation for a Christian community that was struggling with the pressures of their day. "Are any among you suffering?" he asks. "They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise."

Whether you are suffering or joyful, James says lift your heart to God in prayer. Having faith in the Lord amid struggle and thanking God when we feel blessed are the marks of a healthy person-and a healthy community.

Further, says James, "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." Did you notice there how James just turned our most primitive instinct on its head?

Instead of the sick being a burden to be abandoned – like in nature when animals leave behind the sick and the weak – James elevates those who are sick as important to the community. In fact, he empowers them to mobilize the entire community by calling on the church to come to their aid. "Are any among you sick? They should call on the faith community, for prayer. Instead of acting like a struggling community that, as described by Myron Bloy, deteriorates amid worldly pressures, we are called to be a community of faith that lifts each other up in times of trouble, and in that, a community that is itself lifted up.

This church invests a great deal of time and money in being there when someone is sick or otherwise in need. And believe me, that isn't a value held universally by society. If it were, no one would go hungry for lack of food or become isolated in illness or poverty.

No, it is a special community that turns to one another in faith when anyone among them is in need – a community like this one. In God's eyes, the health of the individual and the health of the community are one. In the spirit of preserving our health individually and as a community of faith, I would like us to pray for one another right now.

Take from your bulletin the slip of paper I mentioned during morning announcements. If you haven't already, take a moment now to write down in one sentence a prayer request, something you truly need. Think of something. Make it a genuine concern or need, but also something you don't mind sharing – in confidence – with one of your neighbors in the pew.

I'll give you one minute to do that now, if you haven't already; or you can just think of a prayer request, but make it one simple sentence.

OK, now that everyone has a prayer request, choose a prayer partner, someone sitting next to you if you can. Everyone, please do that now; choose a prayer partner. Does anyone not have a prayer partner at this time?

OK. Now that everyone has a prayer partner, when I say, "Go," you'll have a minute or two for one person to read or state aloud his or her own prayer request to the other person – what you just wrote down or thought of. And then, your prayer partner will offer a simple prayer in return. Now, when you pray, you can make the prayer whatever God lays on your heart. It might simply be to repeat the prayer request and then turn it over to God on behalf of your prayer partner. You'll do that in just a moment, and then after two minutes, I'll have you switch so the other person can read or state his or her prayer request. Are you ready? Go. OK. Now switch, repeating the process of mutual prayer.

OK. Time's up. I hope everyone had an opportunity to pray and be prayed over. If not, see me after worship, and I will pray with you, and let you pray for me if you'd like.

I trust – in Christ – that this has been a valuable experience for you individually. I know in faith that it has been valuable and healthy for us as a congregation.

James says, "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven." We are all in need of healing and forgiveness, of being lifted up to the Lord in prayer.

I pray that today you have planted the seed of prayerful, faithful, godly living, a seed of faith that will be further sown by the leading of Holy Spirit whenever you encounter someone in need, a seed that will travel on the winds of the Holy Spirit throughout your families and communities, and then out across the globe until all the world lives in peace.

Now that's the power of prayer, the power of our congregation in prayer, the power of you and your family and friends when you pray for one another.

I leave you with this thought. When it comes to faith and peace in our families, in our communities and world, if not us, then who? If not now, then when? My friends, let this be the beginning of a power, faithful prayer practice. Take the time and initiative to share and grow the faith by praying for – and with – the people in your life and by praying for this congregation and the world we live in. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

What a gift it is to be able to speak to you, O God, and know that you hear us, and that you care so deeply about us.

We have so many concerns, Lord. Our hearts are burdened by friends and family who are hurting or sick. We see the brokenness in this world, and we cry out to you for healing and peace.

Thank you for all the ways that our prayers are answered – through the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, through softening our hearts, by touching the heart of another.

Thank you, also, for reminding us that you are sovereign, and that we are not forgotten.

We lift up to you our prayers and concerns for all those we continue to keep in prayer.

We trust that you hear our prayers and respond. Not our will, Lord, but yours be done

Perfect our prayers now with the words of the Lord's Prayer, which you taught us to pray together saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**