

“Community- Healed in Christ”

First Presbyterian Church

October 11, 2020

James 5: 16-18

Writer Elizabeth O'Connor tells the story of a man who went each day to sit in a darkened church. One day as he came out, a ... friend (asked) what he did during the long time he spent inside the church. “I just look at him,” (said the man), “and he looks at me.”¹ Wow! “God looks at me.” To be known by God for who you really are, and accepted! Just wow!

And yet, how many of us have that type of relationship with God? I mean, we all know God knows everything about us – the good, the bad and the ugly. But few of us set aside time every day to be in touch with that – with who we really are deep down inside – and to be in touch with God.

Today we have the fourth and final sermon in our series titled “Community” – “Living in Christ” the first week, “Working in Christ” the second, “Strengthened in Christ” last week, and “Healed in Christ” today.

When the Apostle James says, “Confess your sins to one another ... so that you may be healed,” what in heaven’s name does that mean? What is the connection between confession and being healed, being made well?

Well, our sermon series is titled “Community,” so maybe the connection between confession and being made well – being healed in faith – has something to do with the community of faith.

The world in general is driven by envy and competition. If you reveal yourself too openly to your boss or teacher, a friend or foe, chances are they’ll take advantage of it. They’ll use what they know about you to push you down and step ahead of you. It’s a risk, right, when it comes to the “unflattering” things few, if anybody, knows about another person.

Unless, of course, it’s a person of faith you confide in, a person in touch with his or her own vulnerability, someone able to extend the same grace and mercy to you that God extends to us all. The point is the community of faith is driven – not by envy and competition – but by grace and mercy.

¹ *Search for Silence* (Waco: Word Books, 1972), 120.

So, how do we get in touch with our own vulnerability – and accept the vulnerability of others – in the Spirit of Christian grace and mercy?

We do that by being open with one another, by praying for others in their moments of weakness and need, and likewise in our moments of weakness and need, trusting in the power of prayer – theirs and ours – to help us be healed and lifted up.

Prayer is so important to this that right in the middle of “confession” and “being healed,” James mentions prayer, saying, “Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”

It is through confession *and* prayer that we are healed – made well – not only as individuals, but as a community of faith; not only as a community of faith, but as a world of faithful communities, faithful communities from all religions and beliefs who earnestly seek to extend the grace and mercy of God to one another, that it might blanket the whole earth in peace and harmony and abundant life for all.

Who knew confession and prayer was such a global need? James, that’s who. We know that James knew that faith-based confession and prayer has global importance because James mentions as an example the prophet Elijah and global drought.

James says, “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.”

Obviously, a lack of rain throughout the world over would be of global importance. In Elijah’s time, it meant the difference between eating or starving. It was a miracle the likes of which has never been seen in our day and age – prayer bringing rain after a three-year, global drought.

But we know now, things were different at the time of Elijah, and that difference is critical in our understanding of what James is talking about, what he’s revealing to us about our day and age. At the time of Elijah, God worked through prophets and priests. Prophets were how God spoke to us, and priests were how we spoke to God. Prophets revealed to us God’s will, and priests listened – on behalf of God – to our confessions.

In this present day and age – ever since the advent or coming of Christ – God has revealed his will to us directly through scripture, and we ourselves speak to God directly through prayer. And yet, prayer is so much more effective when we do it together, as a people of faith.

It's like the rabbi whose wife asked him if his prayer for the rich to give more money to the poor had been successful. He answered, "Half of my prayer, I have accomplished. The poor are willing to accept the money."² The rich, on the other hand,

Of course, it's a joke. Whether or not the rich should give more money to the poor, that's a major issue in this country. And I know there are people of good conscience who have different views on it.

The saddest part about it is not that we view things differently in this country. It's that we can't even sit in the same room and openly and honestly discuss our different views in a gracious and civil manner.

As a faith community, that's just what we are called to do, and to promote is essential to the welfare of people everywhere.. We are called to be open and honest with one another as together we discern the will of God. And, so that we can be open and honest with one another, we are called to share in the grace and mercy of the Lord, together, extending it to one another. Without that Spirit of openness and honesty moving among us as individuals, we feel closed off, secretive, guilty – sin sick. And for the world as a whole – when we fail to demand and nurture a spirit of openness and honesty – we are destined, as a people, to suffer the effects of deep-seated envy and unhealthy competition.

If you're waiting for a miracle to come down from heaven to save our world – and it might take that if we're not careful, and faithful – but if that's what you're counting on, if you're not willing to demand and nurture openness and honesty and grace and mercy – well then, heaven help us.

The Apostle James, when it came to being open and honest with one another, he equated it with the importance of rain upon the earth, which gives life to all things. And he equated the power of praying for one another – of showing grace and mercy to one another – with the power of being healed, of being made well.

Thank the Lord that God has put us in this community of faith, where we can be open and honest in discerning the will of God, for us and for our world.

Thank the Lord that God put us in this community of faith where we can be healed – be made well – through the grace and mercy of God, shared with one another, prayerfully and faithfully.

² Based on Rabbi David Wolpe, *Off the Pulpit* e-newsletter for 9/1/11. sinaitemple.org.

God help us , we pray, to do that in our lives and the world over, that through such openness and honesty, grace and mercy, the earth would be blanketed in peace and harmony and abundant life, for all. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

As we gather together for worship, so let us gather our hearts, our minds and ourselves into this sacred space of prayer. Breathe deeply of God's presence with us and settle in to these few moments of quietude.

When a concern over your well-being enters your mind, give it over to God. When a worry comes to you, let it go, at least in this moment of centering ourselves before God.

When you think of what the rest of your day holds, push the thought away, for the rest of the day will come. When you have thoughts of all that is before you in the week ahead, set aside those thoughts. The tasks will be there when tomorrow comes.

Be here. Be in this place of prayer. Be here now and breathe in the calming presence of God's love, which will sustain you and provide you with all you need in the days ahead.

You must be present to God now so that you will be aware of God's presence with you in the days to come. Can you not hear the voice of God breaking through? Listen! "Be still, and know that I am God." Listen. And be comforted.

Lord, we trust in your power and your presence, and so we turn now to the prayer you taught us, 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