

September 29-30, 2018

"Saying Our Prayers"

St. Lucas UCC, St. Louis MO

Dr. Keith D. Herron, Senior Minister

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

James 5:13-20

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22; Psalm 124; Mark 9:38-50

Did you know that St. Lucas has been holding healing services recently? Yes, it's quite true I assure you. I make it sound as if it has been something that has just gotten started and maybe that explains why you haven't heard of it. To be honest, I imagine we've been having healing services here at St. Lucas since our beginning in 1880 as members of this church have gathered regularly, faithfully, for intercessory prayer for all this time.

Haven't you heard about our healing service? It's interesting how it works. In each of our three worship services we "gather up" all our collective hurts and concerns, all our joys and celebrations, and everything else we carry around inside us in order that we might share them together. We pray for the healing of those who are sick. We pray for big concerns. We give thanks to God for the joys we're living.

But it's not exactly what you think it might be. In fact, if you were to wander in off the street, you might not think that our meeting was anything unusual. It would seem to you ... well, *so safe*. You could look around the room and think, "These folks look so ordinary. They look like they're quite normal." You might find yourself relaxing from that tense feeling you have about being in the middle of a group of religious nuts.

What we're doing, is as ancient as the first-century church who faithfully gathered together on the seventh day. So what about this prayer business? What is going on? I think it would be fair to say we are acting out a grand experiment, a laboratory, of prayer. We center our thoughts on how our needs are met by God's listening ear and on occasion we sense a hint of God's abiding presence. We are gathering at the place where our lips are drawn near to God's ear. I call it an "experiment in prayer" because it's something we do in hopes of connecting with God.

It doesn't take long in the faith for us to know that we *don't* have a direct line to God where all we have to do is to utter the words and they are done. We can't simply speak and then, "Presto!" it is accomplished. Too many of us have struggled with the fact that we have prayed for those who are deathly sick, we prayed with all of our hearts and wishes, and yet they go on to die despite our earnest prayers. Maybe the formula for healing and prayer goes something like this: "When I am sick, I can pray for healing. Prayer can heal. But sometimes I am not healed."

What happens when we pray? The answer to this question is a delicate one in

coming to terms with prayers that seemingly go unanswered. We must understand that this word from James is not a systematic teaching on the entire subject of prayer for the sick for all time. This is just a fragment of what could and should be taught about prayer. We can argue over the nuances of the subject until we are breathless and blue in the face. Ultimately we must confess that we stand at the edge of the vast sea of great mystery. What does it mean to intercede on behalf of those who are sick, asking God to heal them, and answer our prayers?

Maybe an illustration will help. A minister in England once got word one evening that his closest friend in the ministry was critically ill and not expected to live through the night. Upon receiving this word, he retreated to his study and there fell on his knees and began to intercede with God that this man's life might be spared. He acknowledged his ties of affection and the sense of promise that he felt for the future of this particular man's ministry. He did the very thing our scripture lesson from the book of James admonishes a Christian to do. As he did this, from somewhere inside him a voice said, "Just how serious are you about this colleague's life being spared? Would you be willing to relinquish half the years you have left so that they might be added to his life span?"

The question was so unexpected and penetrating the minister got up off his knees and sat down and literally broke into a sweat. You see, up to that point, he had always thought of intercession as something God did exclusively out of God's resources. It might be like going to a rich man and begging him to divert his enormous wealth in a certain way, not thinking at all about having to get involved with your money.

Suddenly the process of intercession took on an entirely new dimension. Did it involve something on his part as well? He began to think about his own life and family and ministry and the things he wanted to do, and then the life of this friend and his family and his expected ministry, and for a long time he carefully set each of these realities over against the other and pondered their relative value.

Then, with clear resolve, he slipped back on his knees and said quietly: "Yes! I have considered the matter and the prolongation of my friend's life is so precious to me that I hereby relinquish half of the years that I have remaining to me in his behalf." He reported that he got up off his knees, not knowing what would be the result of those words, and his friend did survive.¹

This story can become a turning point in our understanding of the nature of intercessory prayer. A theological issue lies at the heart of the story, namely, if God is in fact all-wise and all-loving, how could my praying about another have any real effect upon God? Obviously, an all-wise God would not need to be informed about one of His creature's condition, and by the same token, an all-loving God would not need to be prodded or cajoled into doing good for that one. If one of your children got sick in the middle of the night, most would find it unthinkable that the brother or sister of the sick one would have to implore you as the parent to care for the sick

¹ John Claypool, "Bearing One Another's Burdens," Northminster Baptist Church, 6/10/79

one. "Oh, all right, if you insist. Since you asked me, I will do it, but otherwise I would not have."

The insight about intercessory prayer is that we human beings have a pool of spiritual energy, just as real as our physical, intellectual, emotional and economic strength. In effect we have the power that comes in the form of courage and hope and endurance.

Could it be that our prayers are forms of a redistribution of wealth of spiritual energy? Those who have the spiritual resources in abundance are called upon to offer some of what they have in reserve for those who are lacking in resources of their own. Look upon it, if you will, as a transfusion of spiritual energy much like that the gift of life that comes from the donation of blood, or even stronger, the gift of living organs for those who would suffer or perish without.

The distinction that becomes essential here is knowing the difference between prayer as a gift and prayer as a tool. To assert, as various NT writers do, that God grants prayer as a gift, is to acknowledge that all healing comes from God. Through prayer, individuals and faith communities approach God, seeking God's intervention, God's presence. Prayer does not, however, become a tool that Christians own and by which they manipulate God into doing their own will. But it is in prayer and in the seeking of the larger combined spiritual forces of a community of faith that God can unleash the power to heal and to bless.

The scriptures ask the question: *"Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any among you 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."*
Amen.

© Dr. Keith D. Herron 2018