

People of Prayer: Praying For One Another (James 5:13-20)

I had to laugh to myself a couple of weeks ago when Troy said that he felt like the topic of his sermon was something that was difficult for him at that time. Prayer is like that for me. It is something that I struggle to do, mostly because I am very easily distracted. It does not come naturally to me. I suspect this is true for many of us, no matter how we first learned about prayer. When we think of praying for one another, we likely think of prayer lists, prayer journals, or prayer rooms filled with post-it notes. Sometimes praying for one another is, quite simply, boring. Just another thing on our to-do list.

James finishes off his powerful letter by talking about prayer: prayer for those in trouble, prayers of praise, prayers for sickness, prayers for miracles, healing, and reconciliation. Prayer is clearly important.

Why is praying for one another so important?

Well, Jesus prayed. A LOT. He prayed in solitary places and on mountains (Matt 14:23; Mark 1:35, 6:46; Luke 5:16, 3:21, 6:12, 9:18, 28, 11:1). He taught his disciples to pray (Matt. 6:9-13, 7:7-11; Luke 11:1-13). He extensively prayed for his disciples and for all who will be called followers of Christ (John 17). He prayed desperately and earnestly before he was betrayed (Matt 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:40-46). He prayed before he broke the bread for the five thousand (Mark 6:41), the four thousand (Mark 8:6), and in the celebration of the Passover with his disciples (Mark 14:22).

What we often forget, or are unaware of, is that *Jesus is still praying for us*. Romans 8:34 says, "Christ Jesus who died - more than that, who was raised to life - *is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.*" The author of Hebrews puts it this way: "Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, *because he always lives to intercede for them...* For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and *sat down at the right hand of God.*" (Hebrews 7:24-25, 12:2) Jesus is not passively lounging beside the Father on his throne. His work on earth was done on the cross, but his work in heaven continues on our behalf. He continues to be our high priest, our mediator, and our intercessor.

The best part of Jesus ascending to heaven is that he sent the Holy Spirit in his absence here on earth to help us. Paul says, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself *intercedes for us through wordless groans*. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because *the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.*" (Rom. 8:26-27) **So the Spirit, living in and among his people, intercedes on our behalf before the Father on the throne, and Jesus Christ intercedes on our behalf at the Father's right hand.**

As Christ-followers, the most clear reason why we need to be praying for one another is because Jesus did so and continues to do so. We are called to be priests of his kingdom (1 Peter 2:9). But prayer is hard. We don't know what to say, and then we give up because, well, God knows what is in our heart anyway. Let's not forget the imagery in Revelation: "The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, *which are the prayers of God's people.*" (Rev. 5:8, 8:4) Our prayers are continually rising to God like a

pleasant smell that you just can't get enough of. It is something that God breathes in deeply and says, "Ah," in satisfaction.

I want us to shift our thinking about prayer. For one, prayer is not a wish asked of a genie in a bottle. Prayer is also not a demand asked of God like an insolent child who demands a chocolate bar. And prayer is not something tacked onto the end of our wishlist or to-do list like an afterthought or a post-script.

What if we started thinking of prayer as *participation with God* in the work he is doing in our world? The Spirit of God inside all of us is praying. Constantly. **All we need to do is join the Spirit in the prayer that is already being offered.** When we think about prayer as *God's work*, the pressure is taken off of us. We don't need to struggle for the right words; God already knows exactly which words we need. Whatever words you offer to him are just right. No formal prayers needed; no *words* are even needed, because prayer is more about aligning with his work and will than about words. Prayer for one another is *participating with God on behalf of others, to intercede as he intercedes on our behalf.*

How do we do that? Going back to the book of James, we can see how the early church sets an example of praying for one another.

"Is anyone in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord." (James 5:13-14)

In order to join in prayer for others, you need to know what is going on in their lives. Sure, you can pray without knowing specifics, but it sure is more helpful when you know what is going on. If I don't know what is going on in a friend's life, I simply don't think to pray for them. This means we need to *pay attention*. Is there someone you know that is in trouble? Financial, health, relational, or spiritual trouble? If you don't know someone in trouble, I'm going to suggest that you may not know the people in your life very well. Everyone has trouble. Maybe not all at once, (I hope not!) but we all have trouble at some point in our lives, and we would do well to notice when others are in trouble. Likewise, we would do well to notice when someone is doing well and is feeling good about life - celebrate that with them!

It also means that we need to *listen to one another*. My mom used to tell me, "*In order to have friends, you have to be a friend.*" Get beyond the small talk and listen to what is underneath that heavy sigh when you ask how their week is going, or the eye roll when they talk about their coworkers, or that slight tensing of their shoulders when the topic of vaccines or politics or you-name-it comes up. It means asking questions and being curious about one another. This is what caring for one another looks like. We have to *be a friend*.

When you pray for someone in a time of need, you are sharing their burden. You are speaking the words they can't find in themselves to utter at that time. You are the shoulder to cry on when tears are the only expression they have. You are having faith on their behalf when they wonder if they have any faith at all. You are doing what practically needs to be done for them when they can't do it. You are *being the presence of God with them*. You are seeking God's will for their good - *God's will*, not your will. That is what prayer for others looks like.

On the flip side, this means *being vulnerable with one another*. James says, "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." There are levels of familiarity and comfort with various people, and we all need those people who we trust to listen to us well. Be vulnerable with those people. Don't just paste on a smile and say, "Yeah, my week was fine," when it

absolutely wasn't. Don't brush aside their concern. Find that person that you trust enough to open up with them about how you are truly doing. It has been a stressful time this year (and last year); it is okay to say that you are not okay and that you need help. This is what the church is for.

The good news is that Jesus hears those prayers and *he is praying for you on your behalf* when you don't have the words. Nothing is too big or too small for him. He healed the paralyzed man who was literally almost dropped on top of him, and he noticed the bleeding woman hidden in the crowd. He sees your needs. He prays for you. But we also need other *people* praying for us, too. We are social creatures and prayer connects us deeply. Nothing is too big or small; tell someone whom you trust. Ask them to pray for you.

So then, what do we expect will happen when we pray?

I most often hear requests for prayer in times of crisis. "Pray for healing for so-and-so. Their mom/brother/sister/themselves has been diagnosed with _____." "Pray for wisdom for this really big decision I have to make about work/school/relationship, etc." "We are driving to Calgary tomorrow. Pray for safety and traveling mercies."

Now, I want to emphasize that these are not "bad" prayers. However, I am concerned if our prayers for others are limited to prayers of health, wealth, and protection. If this is all our prayer life consists of, I fear we are missing the point of what James says about prayer.

Praying for others is also witnessing God's redemptive work on earth. Elijah, a human being like us, prayed that it would not rain and it didn't. And then he prayed, and it did. It wasn't so much that his prayers stopped or caused the rain; by praying for the rain, he was participating in God's plan for Israel and he was attentive to witnessing God's power in stopping and starting the rain. He saw God's power in action because he was looking for it... because he was praying.

Here's a simple analogy. Fritz and I bought a blue Mazda3 last year. When we bought it, I thought, "Wow, this is so cool! This is a colour I have never (or very rarely) seen before! I want this car." Lo and behold, after having bought the car, I now see blue Mazda3s everywhere. In the same shade. We were unaware of how popular the make, model, and colour were before we chose to *participate* in owning one. Now, we are *witnessing* it everywhere because we are aware of the existence of blue Mazda3s in our world.

When you pray for others, you psychologically and spiritually tune yourself in to paying attention to what God is doing in their world. What might have been coincidence before you were praying for them is now an act of God because you were looking for it. Your eyes have become opened to what God is up to in the world.

So when we pray for others, we can expect God to show up because we are looking for him to show up. We can expect reasons for praise, joy, and hope as we watch God at work in the world. We wonder at the grace that allows us to see and participate in what he is doing. We can expect forgiveness and reconciliation because hearts have been opened and softened toward God and others. We can expect a banding-together of community in solidarity and love because we are all tuned into the same station. And we can expect healing - it may be physical, but more likely, it will be emotional, spiritual, and relational healing that happens at a deep soul and heart level.

I fear that when we reduce prayer to wishes of health, wealth, and protection, we are missing what prayer is all about. We miss out on the relationships that can deepen as a result of confessing our

wrongs to one another, sharing in sorrow and grief, or sharing in joy as we watch God heal hearts and relationships. We end up missing out on *seeing God in action*.

The answer to our prayers is God's gracious presence in our very lives. This means that we expect God to show up when we pray - in God's timing and in God's will. This can be tremendously hard, especially when we see loved ones struggling with physical or mental illness, relational distress, or spiritual separation from God. Our world is broken, yet God's grace meets us in our mess. When we pray with an open hand, the Spirit prays and Jesus prays. God always moves, but not always in the ways we expect. Prayer might just change us more than it changes the one we are praying for.

On a very practical level, then, *how* do we pray for one another?

As the singer/songwriter Matthew West says in his song "Do Something":

I woke up this morning

Saw a world full of trouble now, thought

How'd we ever get so far down, and

How's it ever gonna turn around

So I turned my eyes to Heaven

I thought, "God, why don't You do something?"...

He said, "I did, yeah, I created you."

Prayer spurs us on to action on behalf of those we are praying for: we go the extra mile or take risks for the relationship because *we care deeply*; we see the dangerous road a friend is taking and we can't let them continue on it without speaking up; we offer to shovel a driveway or rake leaves for someone who needs it done and can't do it on their own; we make meals, offer our own homes in hospitality, offer our own time to spend with lonely ones living in care facilities or with the homeless man down the street. *We do because we pray, and we pray as we do.*

Praying while serving one another is one way we can pray for one another - simply offering your service to God and joining God in the prayer that is already being offered for the one you are serving. You may have other preferred methods of prayer. If you, like me, sometimes find your prayer time and 'prayer list' dry and dusty, it can be helpful to mix it up a little. I'd like to challenge you to pick one "new" way of praying for others this week or this month that you either have not done before or have not done in a long time. God hears all our prayers, but he also provides us with creativity, imagination, physical bodies, relationships, and other tools that can assist us in being with him on behalf of others. You might be surprised where getting outside your comfort zone in regard to prayer might take you.

Here are a few examples:

- Praying through creative expression: doodling, adult colouring books, knitting, crocheting, or sewing (project), woodworking, painting, writing
 - Our summer knitting project is one example of knitting done in prayer for those in need. I would bet good money that all those people who were knitting, crocheting, or sewing were praying for the unnamed person who would receive that item.
- Change your prayer posture. Pray while kneeling, pray while lying flat on your face, pray while sitting upright, pray while lying down and wrapped up in a blanket. Our bodies have ways of expressing ourselves to God when we do not have the words to say.

- Prayer walks - with a friend or alone. Talk to God as if having a conversation. If you are with a friend, you can walk around your neighbourhood or downtown and pray for each house, family, or business as you walk.
- Check in with one another. Ask one another what you might pray for while on a phone call or coffee date. If you are on a level with them where you are able to do so, pray with them right there. If that feels weird or uncomfortable, simply ask them what is going on in their life and listen well for what you might pray for them on your own time.
- Consider joining or starting a prayer group. There is something powerful about praying as a community. At First B, we have our Sunday morning pre-service prayer on Zoom where some gather together to pray for one another, the church, and our world. During Lent, we had a weekly noon prayer time as well. Consider joining a prayer group, or start your own.
- Pray with a friend, your spouse, children, parents, pastor, or mentor.
- Touch the person you are praying for (if appropriate to do so). A lot is communicated through touch; Jesus touched the bleeding woman, the lepers, the lame, and the blind. If we are to imitate him, let's also imitate that.

These are just a few examples to get you started on thinking about different ways of praying for one another. The great thing is that you can pray anywhere and anytime. God always hears those prayers wafting up to him.

As an aside, let me also say that *you don't need to pray for every single person you know and every situation you can think of every time you pray*. Instead, listen to who the Holy Spirit is praying for. Who is it that is coming to mind repeatedly? Which conversation is replaying itself in your head? Pray for that person. This is what it means when we *participate* in his work and will. He does his stuff and we get to go along for the ride. That takes the pressure off, right? So let's go and be people of prayer.