

PRAYER IS THE KEY  
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The Letter of James

For the last several weeks we have been hearing readings from the Letter of James. Besides an occasional reference, I have not really talked about this letter and today is a good day to take that time as we come to the end of the letter.

The letter of James is a relatively short letter and is considered by some to be a piece of wisdom writing. Some in fact do not consider it a letter, but a series of essays that have been put together to be circulated to the churches in general. Other than an opening greeting it does not contain any of the classic structure of a Greek letter like most of the biblical letters.

This is wisdom literature because in 108 verses James gives 59 imperatives on how to behave as a Christian community. He writes with instructions about how the community is to live together. Typical of wisdom letters there are specific injunctions against mistreating the poor and needy. He writes that love of neighbor is critical to a healthy community. He also speaks of the importance of faith and works. Finally he ends with a passage about prayer in the community, which is our passage for today.

The date of composition is not clear although there are writers like Origen in the mid 2<sup>nd</sup> century who enthusiastically refer to the letter. The letter reflects a Greco-Roman world, but one where the Torah is still at the heart of their world. So it is a very Hellenized Jewish world. There is great debate among scholars about whether or not this was written by James the brother of John and one of the original 12. The question is whether James and Paul are addressing similar issues at a similar time or is one responding to the other's writings. There is no answer and to be honest other than a scholar this does not change the impact on the early church of this letter.

Now Martin Luther hated this letter because he felt it argued against Paul's teaching of salvation by faith alone. However most current theologians believe that James used Paul's writings and expands them into a more understandable form. His statement that faith without works being an empty faith and that we are called to be doers of the word not just hearers certainly do not go against anything Paul actually taught. This is because the acts flow naturally out of our belief and faith. His point is that one who is faithful cannot refuse to act on that faith.

With that background I want to look in particular at the portion we have designated for today, which is at the end of the letter. This whole chapter seems to be an essay as suggested earlier on a single subject. The primary focus of the end of the letter is on prayer; prayer for the individual, prayer for the others, prayer for the community. This is not just prayer that asks for something, but running the whole gambit of the types of prayers, thanksgiving, adoration etc.

James says we are to pray for those who are suffering or sick. We should pray in celebration with those who are joyful. We should pray for those who have sinned and wandered away from the truth. I think the most important point is that in any Christian community we are to pray for and with each other as well as for ourselves.

I came across a video this week by Richard Rohr that meditates on prayer and surrender. By the way Richard's base of operations is the Center for Action and Contemplation, which fits very neatly with the teachings of James. He believes we need both contemplation to discern our relationship with God and then action that flows out of that relationship. Yet what are we to pray for and how are we to pray is a constant question along with how do we know if God answers our prayers?

In the video he says that many of us pray with the assumption that God will then rush in to do whatever we ask; even when we ask from our absolutely human ego centered self, God listens. He says, "Of course I believe God cares .....It says in Luke's gospel do you think any of you would pray and God would not give you the Holy Spirit....So the answer to prayer is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Now that isn't healing grandma right away, but if there is an influx of the Spirit then God has answered the prayer." So in all of the prayers maybe the first thing to do is to ask the Holy Spirit, to pray to or through the Holy Spirit however this works for you, but consider this way of praying. You may notice that when members of our healing team pray for you, the Spirit is almost always invoked.

Speaking of praying for each other we have a very gifted team of healers at St. Aidan's in particular Jeremy Stowell and Peggy Fanney. They are both available for healing prayer and not just on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the month. If you would like to meet with them for some healing prayer you can let me know or contact them directly and they will arrange a time to meet with you.

Part of what this letter is suggesting became a practice with the early monastic orders. All monastic orders have a Rule of Life which guides how their community functions. Our vestry has a Rule of Life in which we promise to pray for each other daily and I believe we have and really do that. And this need to pray for each other is absolutely essential. It's why the prayers of the people in our service are so long. This is why we have a group of 25 or so members who get the prayer chain notifications when people are sick, need help or rejoicing. This is exactly what James is imploring the people to do in today's passage.

It is through praying for each other that the action that James spoke of earlier in his letter comes from. Show me faith without works he challenges. That faith informed by the Spirit will naturally flow out as works of love, compassion, caring and concern for ourselves, for each other and for the larger world. Prayer should be what fuels our community and our work in the world.

So the Letter of James is one that should guide a Christian community. One of the things Chuck will talk about in our meeting after lunch is the proposal for a set of norms

for how we live as a parish. In many respects what we have been reading over the past several weeks in the Letter of James is a set of norms from the early church. The Early Christians communities needed them then and we need them now to be the healthy vibrant parish God calls us to be. You might go back and just read the entire letter of James looking at them as a set of wisdom writings on how to be church.

However underlying all of this I want you to focus on the centrality of prayer and seeking the Holy Spirit in all that we do. As we go through the next several months, prayer and care for each other is how we will move forward. Of that I am certain.