

Sandra Stogsdill Brown

*Pray Big*

A sermon on James 5:13-20

September 30, 2018

A couple of weeks ago, I got a phone call from Jay Gideon. Jay is a retired Disciples of Christ minister who was our parish associate here at FPC during 2016, and his wife Pat was our financial secretary for many years. Jay called because we hadn't talked in a while, and he wanted share with me that his son Chris, who was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer several years ago, was out of treatment options. The doctors had told them there was nothing more they could do. I said, "Jay, can we put Chris on the prayer list?" Jay said, no, not yet. He didn't have Chris's permission to share this information, and he didn't want to risk violating Chris's privacy, given that Chris is a fairly private person.

This past week, Jay called again. This time said, "Please. Please put Chris on the prayer list at First Presbyterian Church." Because that's what we do. At times like this, when there are no more options, and nowhere else to turn, we pray . . . and while I'm sure Jay and Pat have been praying for their son all along, we hope that somehow having a whole church pray can make even more of a difference.

We have been reading portions of the New Testament letter of James for the past five weeks now. He's been getting in our faces, saying things like, "Do the word, don't just listen to it," "People who favor the rich over the poor don't really believe in Christ," "The tongue is a fire," and "You fight because you want stuff you don't have, and you don't have because you don't ask, and you ask for the wrong stuff." And now, in these final verses, he throws out this one: "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up."

I hear that, and I think, whoa. What do you mean, the Lord will raise them up? Does that mean that the Lord will raise them up in the life to come or that they really will be restored to full health, which is kind of what it sounds like?

What if the sick person I'm praying for is not healed? Does that mean my prayer did not have enough faith? If I anointed the person, as James says to do, did I mess that up? What if I had sincere, passionate faith, but the person I was praying for did not, or doesn't really, truly in their heart of hearts want to get well—does that matter? After all, sometimes some people don't want to get well—then you'd actually have to start showing up for your own life and not everybody wants to do that . . .

How important is our prayer in the healing equation—is God actually sitting around waiting for a certain amount of prayer, or certain quality of faithfulness in prayer, to happen before God acts to heal someone? Is it like that Dr. Seuss book, Horton Hears a Who, where all the little Who's are crying out, "We are here, we are here, we are here," so that the animals in the jungle will hear them and realize that there really is an entire little universe that exists on a speck of dust that Horton the elephant holds on a flower with his trunk, but the animals can't hear the Who's until the last little Who joins in, and his one tiny little voice added to theirs is what makes the sound break through? In other words . . . with all the people who are surely already praying for Chris Gideon today, what difference does my prayer or your prayer really make? God can do anything God wants to do, right? Surely God is not dependent on receiving one more prayer in order to activate or complete the healing process. . .

There is much we simply do not know and cannot know about how prayer works.

But the #1 thing we do know is that prayer matters. If you're suffering, says James, pray. If you're feeling good, sing praise. If you're sick, get some prayer. It's what we do.

Other non-profit organizations—let’s be honest—can outshine the church at feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, educating children, making great music—but they cannot touch the Church when it comes to prayer.

Jesus was all about prayer. There’s a story in the Gospel of Mark where the disciples have tried unsuccessfully to cast a demon out of a young man, and they can’t do it. Jesus comes along and drives that demon out of the poor guy, and his disciples want to know, “Why couldn’t we do that?” and Jesus says, “This kind can come out only through prayer.”

He told parables to teach his disciples the importance of PERSEVERING in prayer, like the one about the widow who pestered a coldhearted judge for justice until he finally gave it to her, not because he cared about justice but just to get some peace. Jesus taught them ask, and it would be given; to seek, and they would find; to knock, and the door would be opened. We can’t read the Gospels without realizing that prayer, OUR prayer, matters. Put that down as #1 under our list of things we know about prayer.

#2 under our list of things we know about prayer is that prayer is not just the pastor’s job. James says, it is the ELDERS’ job to come and pray over the person who is sick, and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. Now, the Presbyterian Church didn’t exist yet, so by elders, James is referring to leaders in the church who are mature in their faith, which for us today could be elders, deacons, Stephen Ministers, Sunday School teachers, or any mature believer. The point is, it is a community event, and a community responsibility. If it is only the pastor’s job, or the Director of Pastoral Care’s job, to visit and pray with people who are sick, we not only risk missing many people who need prayer, but we exclude a lot of wonderful pray-ers from engaging in much needed ministry.

#3 is that the sick person has an important job to do. If you are sick, says James, you should CALL for the elders of the church to come. When we're sick, several things stand in the way of this.

- A) We might be private people who don't want a bunch of elders coming over and praying for us and seeing us in our jammies or hospital gown, without makeup on, or without shaving.
- B) We don't like to inconvenience people. We can't imagine that praying for us is actually an enormous privilege and a gift we give to others.
- C) Sometimes we think, "Well, they should KNOW I'm sick/injured/depressed and just OFFER to come over. After all, I haven't been to church in three weeks, and I TOLD someone I was having surgery." Nope, nope, and nope. If you're sick, you call, or have someone else call for you. That's your job.

#4 on our list of things we know about prayer: there's something about CONFESSION. In particular, there is something powerful about confessing our sins out loud. James says, "Confess your sins TO ONE ANOTHER, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed." The corporate prayer of confession we pray each Sunday is a great place to start, but what James describes goes a little further.

Sometimes people just get sick, or injured, or depressed, or addicted. There is absolutely nothing good that can come from blaming, judging, or shaming anyone, no matter what the illness or its cause. But good CAN come from giving someone the safe space to lay down whatever burdens they've been carrying, and much good comes from admitting our wrongdoings out loud, to someone trustworthy who can hold us accountable, as people in 12-Step groups will

testify. Confession opens us up to receive the healing grace of God like nothing else—for we cannot fully receive God’s grace if we cannot recognize how badly we need it.

#5, and this will be our last one for today. Don’t be afraid to pray for big things. I have a sign in my office that reminds me—PRAY BIG.

The things that the Bible teaches us about prayer do not have an expiration date. They were not meant only for people long ago. James cleverly uses the prophet Elijah as an example. Elijah was a great prophet who had lived hundreds of years before James and his readers. Elijah was as fascinating and mysterious to those early Christians as James and Paul and John and all the other apostles are for us today. Elijah was the one who came to a widow who had just the tiniest bit of flour and oil, barely enough for one last meal for her and her starving son. He asked her to make him something to eat first, and when she did, he promised her the flour and the oil would never run out until the end of the famine, and it didn’t. When the widow’s son died, Elijah prayed and God restored the boy to life. Despite those impressive prophetic credentials, James reminds his readers, “Elijah was a human being like us—not God, not Superman—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.”

God says, don’t be afraid to ask for big things. Yes, think about what you really want, as we discussed in last week’s sermon. Yes, it helps when our desires align with God’s desires. No, there are no guarantees. But we have received an engraved invitation to dream big and PRAY big, and that’s got to count for something.

I’ll be gone for the next couple Sundays, traveling to the Holy Land to walk in the footsteps of Jesus with my mom and a group from her church. While I’m gone, let’s try something together: Let’s pray big. Let’s pray for Chris Gideon. Let’s pray for everyone on our

prayer list. Let's pray that God quickly sends us a new Director of Family Ministries who will help us energize our ministries with families and children and youth like never before. Let's pray for the impossible situations in our own families where we feel stuck and can't imagine a way out. Let's pray for the revitalization of the city of Topeka, and its surrounding towns. Let's pray that God would heal the third-degree burns that our tongues of fire have created, and heal the raw, gaping wounds of division in this country. Let us do what the church does best—let us pray! Amen.