

## **THE POWER OF PRAYER – II**

### **The Power of Prayer to Heal**

(03/10/2024)

Scripture Lesson: James 5:13-16

*“Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any 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. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” (James 5:13-16)*

In my Annual Report I noted that one of the characteristics of our church that make us special is our steadfast belief in the power of prayer. To the best of my recollection, when I came here in the fall of 1997, a group of our church people under the informal direction of Martha Hubley was already meeting for a prayer breakfast on the third Sunday of every month. In this breakfast meeting we shared our own concerns, our own struggles, and we asked for prayer. We also raised up the needs and concerns of other members of our church family, our own families, our friends, our co-workers, and we prayed for these people.

At the conclusion of an adult study group on prayer the following year we decided that the natural evolution was to move from a prayer breakfast to a prayer chain. We looked at the way prayer chains were set up in several other churches and then drafted our own guidelines.

Responding to an invitation that we sent out to our entire mailing list, several members and friends stepped forward to form the chain. We continued to meet on the third Sunday of every month to discuss how the prayer chain was working, to continue our study of prayer, and to pray for the people on our prayer list. True to our nature, we also kept the breakfast part intact!

When we became aware of someone who was in special need, we would contact the first name on the prayer chain. It will come as no surprise to our old-timers that this person was Arlene Williams. Arlene would contact me (and consequently Darlene) and then call the next person on the list. That person would call the next person and so on until we reached the end. The last person would then call Arlene to let her know that the chain had been completed. This may sound awkward to you, but we didn't have the internet back then. And we didn't have cell phones. And not everyone had an answering machine, which slowed movement down the chain considerably!

As we take this little walk down memory lane, let me read the names of the members and friends of our church family who were on that original prayer chain, many of whom are no

longer with us. After Arlene came Bob and Sarah L'Heureux, Martha Hubley, Ethel Armstrong, Jeanne Hunt, Dana and Mary Richmond, Bob and Karin Farmer, Tom and Gwen Sickles, Jim Holmes (this was before he was married to Cheryl), Skip and Sharon Willman, Victoria Wilder, Rae Kay, Martha Templeman, Tim and Ann Deschamps, David Sickles, Darcy Hilbert, Jeanne Davis, Evelyn Till, Beverly Lees, Norm and Barb Wicklman, and Lee and Mattie Cummings.

In addition to our shared prayer at the breakfast meetings, we continued our study of prayer, our attempt to understand what prayer is and how it works. This is important to me. Although I have a deep appreciation for mystery and the limitations of our knowledge and our language, our conceptual frameworks, I find I can't believe something that I don't understand.

The prayer chain no longer operates as a telephone chain. Now Bob L'Heureux or I can contact everyone instantaneously through e-mail. As you have noticed, thanks to Linda, we have resumed the weekly printing of the short-term or active prayer list, which was included in your Sunday bulletin this morning, that from time to time throughout the day or the week we will can hold these people in our prayers.

So, let's continue to take a few moments throughout this Lenten season to think about prayer. The goal, however, is not limited to understanding. The goal is to help us deepen our prayer life, to become more constant in prayer, to develop the spiritual discipline we need to make prayer a central part of our faith experience.

In this series, as I mentioned last week, I will be drawing heavily from the Roman Catholic theologian and spiritual guide Henri Nouwen, whose many quotes on prayer are contained in *The Only Necessary Thing: Living a Prayerful Life*. For instance, listen to one of the many things that Nouwen says about prayer:

*Prayer is the bridge between my unconscious and conscious life. Prayer connects my mind with my heart, my will with my passions, my brain with my belly. Prayer is the divine instrument of my wholeness, unity, and inner peace.*

I think you can see how nicely this description of prayer fits with Jung's psychology! Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ, a member of the society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus who, out of her ministry to prisoners on death row, wrote the book *Dead Man Walking*, says,

*On the long road it's good to have Nouwen and his divining rod. Deftly he bends toward the drop of spiritual wisdom caked in the most ordinary things.*

Once again, you can see why I like Nouwen! He helps us find the drop of spiritual wisdom in our ordinary everyday life! Beautifully said! I think this is the secret to having prayer become more of an integral part of our everyday life.

There are many types of prayer. Some prayer is formal. In formal prayer, someone else writes or delivers a prayer that articulates certain feelings for us, that orients us or guides us into a certain way of thinking and feeling, that points us in a certain direction, that points us toward God. In our worship as a gathered church, the prayer of invocation, the prayer of dedication, the pastoral prayer, the benediction, and the Lord's Prayer fall into this category. This kind of formal prayer, either in communal worship or in our own devotions can be very meaningful. But it is not the only kind of prayer.

Prayer can also be informal and personal. Prayer can be just talking with God or Jesus or Mary. We can use everyday language, just like we would if we were talking to another person.

Informal or personal prayer can fall into the same general categories of invocation, thanksgiving, confession, and intercession as formal prayer. We can pray for strength, healing, and guidance. We can say these prayers out loud or to ourselves. Informal, personal prayer, just like the more formal kind, can take place at a time we set aside for prayer or devotions. It can happen during the worship service, e.g., when the choir is singing an anthem, when Michael or Jim is playing the prelude or postlude, or when we feel touched by something in the service. It can also take place throughout the day, whenever we feel like talking things over with God. (Which we should do more often than we do!)

Last week I read the following quote from Henri Nouwen articulating his understanding of prayer. Nouwen says,

*There are as many ways to pray as there are moments in life. Sometimes we seek out a quiet spot and want to be alone, sometimes we look for a friend and want to be together. Sometimes we like a book, sometimes we prefer music. Sometimes we want to sing out with hundreds, sometimes only whisper with a few. Sometimes we want to say it with words, sometimes with a deep silence.*

*In all these moments, we gradually make our lives more of a prayer and we open our hands to be led by God even to places we would rather not go.*

In all these moments, we gradually make our lives more of a prayer and we open our hands to be led by God even to places we would rather not go.

There are no right and wrong ways to pray. There is no wrong way to talk to God. The important thing is to talk with God! Over the next few months, we will be looking at different ways to pray or different types of prayer in the hope that you will be able to find the way that is most meaningful to you. My assumption is that if you can come to understand prayer more deeply, and if you discover the type of prayer that feels most authentic and meaningful to you, you will be more apt to utilize prayer as a resource to help you live the precious life that you have been given by God.

In his letter to the early church (and also us) James speaks of the power of prayer when he says,

*The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.*

This passage witnesses to the power of intercessory prayer, the kind of prayer that is the focus of our prayer chain. James tells us that we should pray for one another, and that our prayer can bring about healing. In the Jerusalem Bible translation we read, “If any one of you is in trouble, you should pray.” Its translation of the last verse reads, “the heartfelt prayer of a good person works very powerfully.” For our prayer to be effective, it needs to be “heartfelt.” We need to pray with our heart as well as our mind!

There are many kinds of healing. Some of us need to experience healing in our relationship with God—perhaps because we are actually worshipping an idol. Idolatry, as we know, is the act of treating something or someone who is not God as God. There are stern warnings about this sin throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Some of us need to experience healing in our relationships with other people, perhaps with some member or members of our family. Some of us need to heal a distortion in the way we think and feel about ourselves, others, and life. Some of us who struggle with illness or dis-ability need to be healed in body.

How can our prayer assist our healing process? How can our prayer help others to be healed? James reminds us that sin is often the problem. It is obviously not the only problem or cause—take, for example, little children who are born with cancer. However, with many of us, sin can be the problem. Sin, which we could describe as alienation from God, can cause us to become sick in body, mind, and soul. Sin causes our relationships with those we love to become sick and twisted. Sin is not just the hurtful things we have done; it is not being the people, the authentic and unique human beings that God wants us to be.

The liturgical season of Lent, with its emphasis on repentance, casts a spotlight on our individual and collective sin. The primary symptom of our sin is suffering: our own suffering and the suffering of those around us, often those in our families. It is also the cause of great suffering between nations, e.g., in the Middle East. In the spirit of the season of Yom Kippur, which often coincides with our celebration of Easter, if we confess our sin and truly repent, we have taken an important first step toward healing. I wish both Israel and Hamas could do this.

James calls our attention to the power of intercessory prayer. He tells us that our prayer can help to heal another person. Some of us have experienced the power of intercessory prayer. What I find interesting is that these healings are now being recorded and studied by science.

Larry Dossey, a physician and the author of *Healing Words*, a study of the power of prayer, shares an experience from the early days of his residency training at Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas, Texas.

One of Dossey's first patients had terminal cancer in both lungs. Dossey advised the man with regard to the options available for treatment, options which might prolong his life for a short time, but which would drastically limit the quality of that time. The patient opted for no treatment.

Dossey says that whenever he stopped by to see his patient, he encountered members of the man's church who had come to sing and pray with his patient. Dossey remembers thinking "Soon they'll be singing and praying at his funeral."

A year later, when Dossey was working at another hospital in the area, a colleague from Parkland called to ask if he wanted to see his old patient. Dossey couldn't believe what the man was saying. See him? He couldn't believe the man was still alive! Dossey went over to Parkland, visited with his former patient, and reviewed his X-rays. He was stunned. The man's lungs were completely clear--there was no sign of the cancer that had been so evident, so malignant, and so pervasive only a year earlier.

"His therapy has been remarkable," the radiologist said, looking over Dossey's shoulder.

"Therapy?" Dossey thought. "There wasn't any therapy--unless you consider prayer."

Dossey told two of his medical-school professors what had happened. Neither was willing to acknowledge that the man's healing was miraculous. They were either unwilling to talk about it or attributed it to the natural course of the disease. But Dossey was convinced that something very unusual had happened! Even though he had long ago given up the faith of his childhood in favor of a belief in the power of modern medicine, he began to open himself to the possibility of the healing power of prayer.

So, what happened? How was this man healed? What role did the man's faith have in the healing? How important was his membership in a community of faith? How important was the faith of his friends who prayed for him? Would the healing have taken place if the man had not believed in the healing power of prayer? Would it have happened without the prayers of the faithful in his church community?

There are also the troubling questions. Why was this man healed, and not the person in the next bed? Why not the child down the hall whose parents and their church prayed twenty-

four hours a day for healing? How can we understand God's role in what happened? What does prayer teach us about the mind-body relationship? What does it teach us about the importance of faith? And what does it teach us about God?

Examples like the one that Dossey shares and the many examples from our own experience here in this church, examples of what we might call unexpected if not miraculous healing, challenge us to think about the healing power of intercessory prayer. They challenge us to deepen not only our understanding of prayer but also our practice of prayer. They challenge us to pray more often, to lift up more and more of our life in a spirit of prayer.

As I have often said, we don't have all the answers in this church. But we are searchers! We know enough to ask the right questions, the important questions, and we struggle with these questions as individuals and as a community of faith. We know that if we approach these questions, if we approach life in an attitude of faith, the Holy Spirit will lead us into the answer. Through this faith journey, we know that we will deepen our relationship with God, experience the kingdom of God within, and perhaps even be healed in body, mind, and spirit.

In the week to come—let us pray.

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