

THE PRAYERS OF THE JUST

James 5.12-16

September 30, 2018

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

The choir this morning, in the words of a Kenyan Folk Song, has reminded us that:

The ones who are blessed, pray ...

The ones who have peace, pray ...

The ones who have joy, pray ...

The ones who know something about well-being, pray ...

Jesus said so.

On the face of it, this seems a little backward. If I am already blessed, why pray? If I already have peace and joy and some sense of well-being why pray?

Our Kenyan sisters and brothers say we should do it because, “Jesus said so.” That might not be an altogether satisfying answer. From the time we were children, many of us have been resistant to the idea that we should do anything just because someone said so.

But here we are, as we say, “a community of faith united in exploring what it means to follow the way of Jesus,” so I guess, at the very least, if Jesus “said so,” we might want to explore what that means.

And, by the way, aren't there times in your own life when whatever blessing or peace or joy or well-being you have doesn't seem like enough for the moment at hand?

I don't know about you but I've been praying this week. I've been praying this week for the women I know who are survivors. I've been praying for the strength to tell the truth. I've been praying for the wisdom to do what this moment in our nation's life together is calling me to do.

I've been praying for something that shouldn't seem like a miracle. Justice.

That leads me to recognize some special guests who are with us this morning. Along with our beloved Elie Smith are Judge LeRoy McCullough of the King County Superior Court and Justice Steven C. Gonzalez of the Washington State Supreme Court.

The last time the four of us were together in this place was September 25, 2016 for the memorial celebrating the life of Charles Z. Smith, a longtime member of this church, a former national president of our denomination, and the first African-American Justice on the Washington State Supreme Court.

On that day two years ago, my job was to pray. And so I welcomed people with the words of the prophet Micah: "What is it that God requires of us? To do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Justice Smith, I said, was someone who did justice – not just because it was his job or his title but because it was his calling. And the justice he did included making sure that the voices of women and people of color and people with unique abilities were heard in our judicial system. Whatever we think justice is supposed to do, it cannot be done when the voices of some people are shut out of the conversation.

Justice Smith also knew that justice without mercy could be harsh so we told stories that day about the kind of support and compassion he demonstrated for all kinds of people. I think Justice Smith knew that justice without mercy is just plain revenge. And mercy without justice is irrelevant.

And holding those two together – doing justice and loving mercy – often takes a wisdom greater than our own. I don't know whether Justice Smith would have described himself as a man of prayer, but there was a

humility about him that seemed to recognize a power and a wisdom greater than his own.

I said all that. And then I got around to doing the thing I was asked to do – to pray. And that prayer two years ago is my prayer today: “We ask that the inspiration of this amazing life will help us imagine our own lives as justice, mercy, and humility woven together for the blessing of all people.”

I think our Kenyan sisters and brothers are on to something. Prayer isn't just about asking for what we lack. Prayer is also recognizing what we have. If the ones who are blessed pray, it is because they know what being a blessing can mean. If the ones who have peace pray, it is because they know what it means to be peace.

I'm grateful for Mary and Brooke Rolston introducing us to Parker Palmer's version of the Lord's Prayer because I think today about the line: “let forgiveness flow like a river between us, *from* each one, *to* each one, to each one.”

Prayer isn't just asking for something we lack. It's recognizing something we have. We pray for blessing because we *are* blessing. We pray for peace because we *are* peace. We pray for forgiveness – for mercy – because it flows like a river between each of us.

Now none of this is unrelated to the Letter of James in the New Testament we have been talking about throughout September. If you did your own reading, you know that, like the Hebrew prophet Micah, James has a lot to say about doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God.

The bottom line for James is action. “Pure, unspoiled religion ... is this: coming to the aid of widows and orphans,” he says. And he is famous for saying, as Companis worker Sumeet reminded us last week, “faith without works is dead.”

So it might be a little surprising to come to the end of James and read these words:

James 5.12-16 (the *Inclusive Bible*)

Above all, my sisters and brothers, don't swear any oath by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no. In this way you're not liable to judgment. Are any of you in trouble? Then pray. Are any of you in good spirits? Then sing a hymn of praise. Are any of you sick? Then call for the elders of the church and anoint them with oil in the name of Christ. And this prayer offered in faith will make them well, and Christ will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. So confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayers of the just are powerful and effective.

For a book about action, this seems like an odd ending – especially if we have come to think that action and prayer are opposed to each other.

It's like all those folks who look at the devastation of gun violence and think it is enough to offer their "thoughts and prayers."

It's what kept me from writing on Facebook that I was praying for all the victims of sexual violence this week. It isn't that I wasn't praying. It was that this culminating moment in our life together calls for something more than thoughts and prayers. We need action.

It's like James says earlier in his letter:

My sisters and brothers, what good is it to profess faith without practicing it? Such faith has no power to save. If any are in need of clothes and have not food to live on, and one of you says to them, "Goodbye and good luck; stay warm and well-fed," without giving them the bare necessities of life, than what good is this? So it is with faith. If good deeds don't go with it, faith is dead."

Thoughts and prayers without action, James says, doesn't mean anything.

And then I read something from Benedictine Sister, Joan Chittister, that brought me up short. She writes:

All sense of purpose proceeds from the center of the soul. Anything else, any other wellspring of purpose, gives rise only to action, not wisdom. The problem is that action alone is always dangerous.

“Action alone is always dangerous.” Maybe that’s what James had in mind when, after all this talk about action, he ends up talking about prayer.

Sister Joan says this is about:

... dipping into the well of the self [or the soul] rather than simply dashing headlong into the world, unknowing and uncaring of what we do or why we do it or what it will really mean to others. Think things through before you plunge into them ... And then, when you know why you’re doing what you’re doing, do it with all your heart. Do it until it’s done. Do it without fear. Don’t do it simply to win. Do it because it is a good thing to do.

That’s why, with all the good things that need to be done in the world this morning, we are sitting here. We are sitting here to try to find some way to tap into the deep well of our own souls so that, when we go out into the world, wellness goes with us.

The “just” pray, in other words, not just because they see the lack of justice in the world but because they recognize the claim of justice on their own lives.

And it starts, James says, with “letting your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no.

The “just” are the just not because they are perfect but because they have integrity. They are authentic. They are honest and they tell the truth because they know that prayer - getting to that deep well of the soul - means taking that uncomfortable journey down through pretense.

In staff meeting this week, Margie Paynton reminded me of that great little book on prayer by Anne Lamott, *Help Thanks Wow*. She says that: *... prayer begins an honest conversation. My belief is that when you're telling the truth, you're close to God. If you say to God, "I am exhausted and depressed beyond words, and I don't like You at all right now, and I recoil from most people who believe in You," that might be the most honest thing you've ever said. If you told me you had said to God, "It is all hopeless, and I don't have a clue if You exist, but I could use a hand," it would almost bring tears to my eyes, tears of pride in you, for the courage it takes to get real – really real. It would make me want to sit next to you at the dinner table.*

... prayer, she writes, is our sometimes real selves trying to communicate with the Real, with Truth, with Light. It is us reaching out to be heard, hoping to be found by a light and warmth in the world.

I know that there are all kinds of forms of prayer. But it seems to me that all of them are inviting us to what Sister Joan calls “the center of the soul” – that place from which we act with our real selves, from our deepest integrity, with honesty about our lives and our intentions.

I get all that. I may not be good at it. But I get it.

Where this gets tricky for me is when James promises that “the prayers of the just are powerful and effective.” Just what is prayer supposed to accomplish? In a letter about action, what is prayer supposed to do?

If I am somewhat skeptical about what prayer does, I have good reasons.

When I was growing up, I was told that homosexuality was sin. And that, if I prayed honestly enough, with enough authenticity and with enough integrity – if I really meant it – God would cure me of this sin.

And so I prayed. And I prayed. And I agonized. And I bargained.

And no cure.

One day in college, I found myself sitting on the banks of the Grand River in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I was frustrated and depressed – which is to say that I was angry with myself and with God. I started praying over and over again: “God, don’t let me love anyone; it’s too difficult and it’s too dangerous; the way to fix me is to just not let me love anyone.” I kept praying that prayer over and over again like a mantra: “God, don’t let me love anyone.”

And then it hit me. If God *is* love, how could this prayer ever be answered?

At the core of the universe – at the center of my own soul – was this deep well of love that keeps looking for a way to get out. And the only way it was going to get out was to tell the truth about myself and to learn how to move with that love out into the world.

What prayer accomplished that day was not the cure I had been promised. It wasn’t even what I was asking for. It was something more than I could have imagined.

In a way, that prayer saved my life. It raised me from the dead. It went with me on that long journey from the Grand River to this day and this place. It helped to make me who I am today.

It has been said that prayer doesn’t change things. It changes us. And that is probably true. But maybe in changing us, things do get changed.

In the last conversation I had with Justice Smith, I asked him if he had any wisdom for me about how we should move forward as a church. He said: “Just be yourself.”

That wasn’t the wisdom I was looking for. I wanted something more – something that felt powerful and profound that I could hold on to.

“Well,” I said, “I do my best to be myself ... but is there anything else that could help me as we go forward in our life together?”

“Just be yourself,” he said.

Justice Smith knew that being just isn't about being perfect. It certainly isn't about pretending to be perfect. It's about your “yes” being yes and your “no” no. It's about being honest and having integrity. It means telling the truth about yourself and being open to a power – a spirit - that is already at work within you that can accomplish far more than any of us can ask or imagine.

Just be yourself.

Elie says that Justice Smith loved the old spirituals. And so we are going to sing one of them in his honor this morning, “Every time I feel the Spirit moving in my heart, I will pray.”

And today, if you hear that voice – if you feel that Spirit moving – for God's sake, for the world's sake, for your sake, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

“Our Common Prayer” was a gift to University Baptist Church from Parker Palmer and Joan Szymko. The words about action from Sister Joan Chittister come from her monthly reflection, “The Monastic Way,” September 2018 published by Benetvision, www.joanchittister.org. Anne Lamott, *Help Thanks Wow* (Riverhead Books, 2012), pp.6-7.