

## **Prayer: It's about Relationship Part II**

**James 5:13-20**

Good Morning Church Family,

It's nice to see you all this morning. We're continuing this morning with our worship series on Prayer. Last Sunday, we reframed the question "Why do we pray?" into a question of "Whom are we praying to?" Prayer is about a relationship between us and God; a conscious conversation with God that draws us into deeper intimacy with God. Relationship between ourselves and God is central to prayer.

Personal prayer, that is prayers that are offered from your own self in conversation with God is definitely one facet of prayer. Many people start their mornings by doing devotions and praying, one of my earliest memories was being taught to say by bedtime prayers, always beginning with "Now I lay me down to sleep..." Some people have prayer journals, where they keep track of things that they are praying for and the ways that see God moving in those areas. So, lots of wonderful ways to practice personal prayer.

This morning, we are going to talk about another facet of prayer-corporate prayer, or some people call it communal prayer. When more than one person gets together to pray to God about something. That's the simplest definition. That's exactly what we practice each Sunday morning when we have our sharing and prayer time. The passage that Ed read for us this morning from the book of James talks about the value that prayer - in all its forms -prayers of praise, grief, thanksgiving are all beneficial for the building up of the body of Christ.

So, what is happening in communal prayer that builds us up? How does praying together differ from praying by ourselves?

First, communal prayer reminds us that we are not alone. It's not just God and Myself, rather it's God and All of Us together. When I first discovered Anabaptism, it was the idea that our faith is meant to be lived out and worked out in a faithful community that was the most compelling to me. It wasn't just a personal relationship with Jesus that mattered (to be clear, it does matter), but it was also about my relationships with fellow believers. This venn diagram of me and God and us and God provides a sort of glue that binds us to one another and to God.

Sometimes I'll hear people ask the question of how is Church any different from the community and relationships that I can find at the hockey rink or in my pickleball group? And certainly there are similarities, and it can be easy to feel like church is just another club or human institution, but corporate prayer is a tool to help combat that idea. Here we are, Lord, together, offering who we are and what we desire in prayer to you, in submission to you. Corporate prayer is a way to refocus ourselves on Jesus, on deepening our intimacy with him together. Our journey with God, as a church, is dynamic, moving and changing as the spirit leads, and prayer both personal and corporate, keeps us connected to the communication of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, communal prayer invites us into intimate communion with one another. As I was formulating ideas for this series, I asked Taylor, "Why do you think we pray?". He pondered for a bit and then he said, "Because it draws us closer together." He went on to explain that he thinks corporate prayer is important for the life and health of a church because we're often sharing things that are hard, or personal, areas where we're feeling friction in our lives. As we talked about last Sunday, prayer is the language of intimacy. Intimacy between us and God and intimacy between one another. The sharing and prayer times in our congregation have been one of my favorite things in our church, and I've been honoured to see the ways in which people

share the deep things on their hearts with one another.

At the church I grew up in, we had a similar structure of sharing and prayer. People would stand up, or raise their hands and an usher would bring them a mic to share their prayer item.

Eventually though, the church grew “too big” for this to be feasible, sharing would take too much, too many people talking for too long. So, the church shifted between written prayer requests put in the offering plate, or a more general prayer that would pray for needs like sickness or grief. And while I understand why this happened, I still mourned the loss of that.

That sort of “open mic” sharing is a gift to the life of a church. Sharing these prayer needs to the larger body is a way of saying, “You are my people. I’m trusting you to hold the weight of this thing with me and offer it to God.”

And that offering of a prayer to a body of believers is an immense act of trust and vulnerability and all followers of Jesus must strive to be worthy of that trust; to be a safe space for that kind of open sharing. Let me say a little more about what I mean by that. I remember my mom coming home from a women’s bible study, where they would share with and pray for one another. She mentioned that there was one woman who would never pray aloud. She told the group, “Once, when I prayed aloud in a group, someone laughed at me. So, I’ve never prayed aloud since.” Or I heard a story of a woman who kept a very painful loss to herself, not asking for prayer, because she said, “you know how people can talk.” To me those stories are just tragic. When someone makes themselves vulnerable in asking for prayer, we must meet them with all the grace and care that the Holy Spirit offers. In our church back in Manitoba, we didn’t frequently share with our church- call it nerves, call it pride, but we didn’t. And after months of Taylor being unemployed and looking for work, we asked for prayer. It felt vulnerable. Just briefly, no great story, just that he needed work and it was taking its toll on us in a lot of ways. And goodness, that church PRAYED for us, three people from the room prayed, and

immediately following the service, the pastor came to us and said if something happens and you can't make ends meet, you tell us right away. We'll look after you.

This week, the kids and I came down with some sort of miserable virus. Not covid thankfully, we tested often. One evening, after the kids were in bed, Junia padded upstairs and asked me if I could come down and pray for her to get better. I said sure and then she said, "I'll pray for you too, because you're sick too." I told her I'd love that. This is the first time Junia has ever prayed aloud for me. She's not one of the kids who volunteers to say grace at the table. And I will hold that sweet, beautiful, nervous little prayer in my heart for the rest of lives. To offer a prayer to the God of Heaven and Earth on someone's behalf is a holy thing. Let's remember to treat it as such.

And the flipside of this equation is a challenge for all believers too- to make ourselves vulnerable to one another. To ask for help, to ask for prayer, to admit there are places in our lives where we are not in control, and we need help. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, admonishes them to, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." That's Ephesians 4:2-3. We are called to bear one another, one another's burdens in love.

I'll be the first to admit, I have a hard time accepting gifts, or being the recipient of another person's generosity. Call it American individualism, call it a weird pride in not owing anyone. It's a struggle for me. I liked the feeling of being the giver, not the receiver. Yeah, I think it is a pride thing. And it's something that I've had to wrestle with, truthfully, since coming to this church. BECAUSE all of you have been so generous, supportive and giving to my family! Way to make it hard, you guys. I realized that as much as being a generous giver is lauded in the Bible, and it's good to give, it's also a spiritual practice to learn to receive graciously. To allow givers the joy of

giving, without saying, “Oh you don’t have to do that. Or, oh you really shouldn’t” Scripture makes it clear that we are all needy people, and sometimes the generosity of God shows up in other people.

To connect that to prayer, part of receiving from the community is being vulnerable enough to say what we need to pray for, what we need help with, which is hard, but it’s been said that when one person tells the truth, it frees up everyone else to do the same. When one person steps out in vulnerability, it allows others to do the same. I have a friend who raises her Grandkids. She was in a group of women, one of whom is expecting her first grandchild, who was gushing about her new grandmother role, and to help raise this new life. Another woman in the group asked my friend what that was like, and she said the honest truth, “It’s really hard.” Her comment sort of sucked the air out of the room. She was feeling sheepish about the whole interaction, but then, afterward, a woman came to her and shared her whole story. My friend’s honesty gave permission for others to do the same. And in corporate prayer, one person’s vulnerability can open up space for everyone to do the same.

So when the Apostle James writes, “ Is anyone among you 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. “ In order for that instruction to build up the church, it asks the members of a church to be both vulnerable and generous with one another.

Another gift of communal prayer, or even just praying for others on your own is that it opens up a space for the Holy Spirit to work through you in the lives of your sisters and brothers in Christ. Prayer is one of the ways that God gets our attention, so to speak. Father James Martin, who I spoke about a lot in my sermon last week, said this, “It’s attention. It’s not only asking God to

help them, but it's allowing God to ask you to help them. Right. So you keep praying for someone who's lonely, lonely, lonely, and you never call them or text them. Then you're praying about a friend who is lonely and you feel sad. You say, well, where's that coming from? Was that not God's sadness for that person? Can you see that as an invitation? Or if you're in your praying and you have a desire to help them? I wish I could, but where is that desire coming from? That desire is coming from God. So this is what I mean by listening to God, listening for God, listening to those emotions, insights, memories, feelings, desires, words and phrases, images that come up and taking it seriously that this is this may be God communicating with you, because, again, how else would God, you know, affect God's desires in the world for that person other than working through you." Let's aim to listen to the nudging of the Spirit that comes to us in prayer.

Finally, a word of encouragement about prayer from James. When something really difficult or tragic happens, people will often say, with somewhat of a wistful sigh, "The only thing we can do is pray." And I get that. I've felt that too, that feeling that prayer isn't enough, we just want to fix this thing that is so wildly out of our control. But James reminds us that that's the whole deal, we are praying to the one who holds all things in his hands, the one who is making all things new, "And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops."

I'm sure all of us in this room have felt the disappointment of a prayer that was not answered in

the way that we hoped. And being righteous and praying doesn't equal all green lights from God, but that doesn't mean that prayer doesn't matter. That prayer isn't effective. Prayer binds us in relationship to God and to one another, and that is enough to carry us through anything we may face.

Amen,