

THE SUFFERING, THE SICK AND THE CHEERFUL

JAMES 5:13-20

Are there any among you suffering? Or should I wait and ask this question halfway through the sermon? If we interpret James literally, the beginning of this sermon should feel like a survey. Are any among you suffering? Are any among you cheerful? Are any among you sick? Please resist the urge to answer the question for somebody else, as much fun or as helpful as that may be, and consider this an exercise in self-examination and celebration of God's grace.

Scripture proclaims the mystery of faith, and in proclaiming this mystery, Scripture calls and convicts us to step beyond that which causes us to suffer. On this subject, Buddhists and Christians agree. The first noble truth of Buddhism is that all is suffering. I have noticed that World Religions students often resist this notion, dismissing this affirmation of faith as pessimistic or fatalistic. The problem with dismissing the first noble truth is that it ignores the next three, which calls and equips the faithful Buddhist to let go of that which causes suffering. Even if one is unwilling to sign on to the notion that all is suffering, he or she is less likely to argue that each and every one of us does not suffer from time to time.

When I say "suffering," what comes to mind? Often when I ask groups to reflect on the subject of suffering, they respond initially with meditations on physical pain. Meaning: If I am able to diagnose the cause of my suffering, then I may be treated surgically or pharmaceutically, and all will be well, at least with my body (if not my mind and soul). Of all the species of suffering in the world, physical pain may be the most visible, but invisible pain, the pain that lurks behind the masks that we wear and the facades that we build, exists, too. The Gospel of Jesus Christ speaks to both forms of pain in God's willingness to take the form of servant, becoming flesh and dwelling in us, and in God's nearness to us in the gift of a Spirit that is holy, merciful and just.

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26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B, September 27, 2009*

Often initial responses to suffering are personal. I ask students about suffering, and they remember being rushed to an emergency room, falling out of love or grieving the death of a dearly departed, and you know me well enough to know that I do not let the discussion stop here, because all suffering is not local inasmuch as all hunger is not global. There is not always an ambulance to call, and one does not have to travel too many blocks from University Boulevard to find abject poverty.

James' letter to Jews outside of Palestine acknowledges suffering visible and invisible, economic and personal. The letter concludes with chapter five, and chapter five concludes with this morning's reading. Suffering is a thread that runs through the entire chapter, which begins, "Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you." This misery is coming, because laborers have been exploited so that the hearts of the wealthy may be "fattened."

Attention then shifts to the exploited, the ones whom James calls "beloved." James exhorts them, and by extension, exhorts us, to "be patient" and set boundaries, letting our "yes" be yes and our "no" be no. To assume that all suffering comes from somewhere else is self-deceptive. In this morning's Esther reading, Haman is hanged on gallows prepared for Mordecai. Sometimes suffering is the natural consequence of a personal decision. When suffering is self-inflicted, remember to be patient with yourself, because patience is a form of forgiveness.

At last James arrives at this series of questions for the suffering, the sick and the cheerful. The rhetorical strategy is brilliant, because by this stage of the letter, he has established that everybody is suffering or will. The only variable is, "To which category one belongs?" James says that if you are suffering, pray. If you are cheerful, sing, and if you are too sick to sing or pray, call the elders of the church (a partial list is provided on the back of the Order of Worship) and ask them to pray for you and to anoint you with oil.

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What would hymn-singing at UPC be like if we interpreted James literally? How often would you not sing? What would happen to the choir? Remember to let Bill know if you are not feeling cheerful enough to sing. How would you feel if an elder showed up at your door to anoint you with oil the next time that you are sick? Maybe your response would depend on the elder...

Historically, oil points to the Holy Spirit. The transparency of oil helps us to appreciate the invisibility of the Spirit. In the ancient world, the world in which the New Testament was written, oil was a common remedy for physical pain suggesting that physical pain served as a point of entry into the subject of suffering for the early church, too.

James' proclamation that "the prayer of faith will save the sick" reminds me of a story. When Leo Sandon, who preached here on the Sunday that I was ordained, was in graduate school at Boston University, he served a congregation in New England. At the end of the every service, he and his wife Marvel Lou would stand at the door and greet people. One Sunday, after a parishioner greeted Leo, she spoke to Marvel Lou and asked her to pray for her. Leo overheard the prayer request and asked the woman why she did not ask him to pray for her. She looked at him and said, "Well, Leo, the prayers of the wicked availeth nothing." The prayer of faith may save the sick. The Lord may raise them up. Anyone who has committed sins may be forgiven.

For James, forgiveness is contingent upon confession of sin but not just any confession of sin. James has something more public, juicier and more gossipy in mind: confession of sin to one another. What would happen if we practiced what James preaches in this service? The confession of sin would be spontaneous not scripted. It would feel more like the Prayers of the People except that instead of asking "What joys and concerns have you brought with you to church?" I would say, "Which sins would you like to confess this week?" Wouldn't that be fun assuming that we were not led into the temptation of confessing other people's sin?

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In truth, there is healing in confession, especially when the violated party is there to hear the confession and to forgive as God calls and empowers us to forgive (because you know that God forgives our debts as we forgive our debtors). James knows this. This is why his conclusion to the letter begins with a big, bold “therefore” statement: “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of righteous is powerful and effective.” Amen.

Oh, wait! This is not the end, though part of me wishes it were. The letter continues: “Elijah was a human being like us, 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.” Recently, I prayed that it would not rain for 24 hours, and it rained. Oh, well, I suppose the prayers of the wicked do, in fact, avail nothing.

The obvious question is, “Is this how prayer works?” Is it possible to change God’s mind or the weather forecast? James assumes that the faithful are capable of changing God’s mind, but what happens when one faithful person prays for rain and another faithful person prays for sunshine? Maybe we should not interpret James literally. Protestant Reformer Martin Luther did not. Luther questioned whether James belongs in the Christian canon because James’ emphasis on works dampens Luther’s celebration of justification by faith.

In James’ defense, the Gospel proclaimed in this letter is one of healing and wholeness as opposed to achievement or perfectionism. James is clear that each and every one of us is sick. Each and every one of us suffers. Sometimes pain is inflicted on us. Sometimes we inflict suffering on ourselves and on others. The cheerful effervescence about which James writes comes from truth, truth about God, truth about you and truth about me. This truth is interpreted together by grace through faith in a Christ who loves, heals and forgives, and this health is defined holistically: body, mind and spirit. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God’s judgments and

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how inscrutable God's ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever. Amen.

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