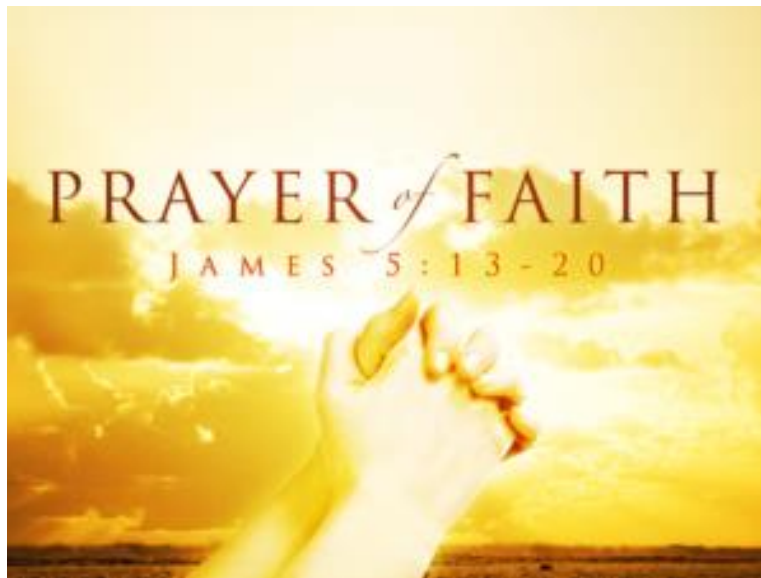


Sermon – January 14, 2024
“Lord, teach us to pray”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: James 5:13-20

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Jesus, fuel our continuing transformation into your image with these words and lead us out to fruitful labor in your mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning and welcome to the second Sunday in Epiphany. Lent is not far away. Hopefully we are beginning to remove our Christmas decorations, and we have noticed that once again the days are growing longer.

In Matthew’s Gospel, there are three times in close proximity that Jesus uses the word we translate as “whenever” : whenever we give alms, whenever we pray, and whenever we fast. Jesus is not telling us *if* we do these things but is addressing how we are to approach them *whenever* we do them. The implication is that we will give alms, pray, and fast. Jesus has an expectation that his disciples’ lives will be defined by these three activities: the giving of alms— money to care for the needs among us, prayer, and fasting. Over the next few weeks as we move toward Lent, I will share some of Jesus’ teaching on prayer and fasting, but will leave the giving

of alms for another sermon. The sharing about prayer will not be exhaustive as that would take many hours but it will touch on some of the instructions Jesus and the apostles have provided for us about prayer in the scriptures. Jesus, as we may recall, was often in prayer. He prayed throughout the night before important decisions and he prayed for his disciples (that includes us) as he was going to the cross. Jesus also provided parables and life lessons for his followers to teach them about prayer. We most likely are familiar with the response Jesus gave to the disciples who asked him to teach them to pray as John taught his disciples to pray. In response, Jesus taught them The Lord's Prayer, a prayer we pray each Sunday and a model for how we are to pray. I hope that we are people of prayer and are seeking to form our hearts, homes, and church into houses of prayer. But if you are like me and many other people, if we are honest, we might notice that our prayers are often more like shopping lists than deep cries to God. We might recall the blind man beside the road whose prayer to Jesus was simple: "Lord, have mercy on me," a prayer that was repeated until Jesus came and asked what he could do for him. We might also recall the account of Mary and Martha where Martha is distracted by the many things she has to do to prepare a meal for the visitors who have come to her house while her sister Mary sits at Jesus' feet and is simply focused on him and nothing else. Mary is a model of prayer, where we seek to sit before Jesus and focus on him and what he is doing, setting aside our other cares of the moment. Martha is also a model of prayer where we come to Jesus with our own wants and desires and miss the better part of prayer, a time of focus on Jesus and what he is seeking to teach us. Prayer should always be a conversation with God, a time when we listen and a time when we speak and even wait before God for Him to do a work in us. We are not always to pray in the form of a petition, even though there is a time to lift our petitions to Jesus. Martha's type of prayer is valid, but Jesus points out that Mary's is better. I often recall the Japanese translation of the Bible that was shared with me where, when talking about God and prayer, it was translated as when we pray, God brings his throne room chair to where we are, sits down in it, and leans forward to listen to hear every word of our prayers. And always, as we pray, we should be open to the actions of Jesus in response to our prayers to change us so that we might respond as he would have us to the circumstances we are bringing before him.

Today I would like to focus on the words concerning prayer found in James 5:13-20 and highlight a few of the many thoughts about prayer that James highlights for us as he ends his letter. James' first point about prayer is to assure us that when we are suffering, we should pray.

The word translated in the NRSV as “suffering” is not so much related to illness as it is to the idea of times in our lives when we are having trouble, times when life has become difficult, troublesome, or beyond what we can bear. The type of prayer James is advising us to use is not for the removal of circumstances, but for us to be strengthened so that we might endure the suffering we are experiencing. Prayer in response to suffering is prayer like the cries of the blind men asking for Jesus’ mercy for them as they endure their blindness. And so, when we experience trouble in our lives, we are to cry out to Jesus, asking him to strengthen us so that we might endure our situation. Americans in general don’t normally have a concept of enduring difficulty. We typically want a quick resolution to our pain and suffering. Yet, Jesus works through those times to bring us spiritual growth, and so James encourages us to pray in those times. Don’t think of suffering prayers as asking to endure an unacceptable situation but an openness to Jesus’ care, guidance, and strengthening as we experience trouble in our lives. When troubles come, we are to respond first by praying to Jesus.

Don’t miss the response to those times in our lives when we are cheerful. Our response is singing songs of praise. When our circumstances make our hearts cheerful, we are to give praise to Jesus by singing. I once heard singing described as praying twice, once with the words we use and also with our hearts. I would encourage us to learn a hymn or praise song and have it ready to sing or even hum, if singing is not one of our gifts, when joy fills our heart. We could also pick out a psalm or several psalms and memorize them and use them as the words for our own songs of praise. When our hearts are cheerful, we should find words of praise on our lips lifted to Jesus in song.

The next type of prayer James points us to is prayer for the sick. He says, “Are any among you sick?” If so, he says, they are to call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. So, when we are feeling bad, when illness has become our lot, we should call for the elders and ask them to come or to at least take a few minutes and pray for us. Don’t wait until you are on your deathbed in the hospital. Whenever you are ill, down, or not feeling well, call your pastor and say, “Would you pray for me or could you come and pray and anoint me with oil?” Notice, James does not use the word pastor or shepherd, but elders. We don’t just need to call the pastor when we are ill. We can call the elders, the leaders of the church, and ask them to pray for us. And I will also point out that the word “elder” is not singular but plural. We are to call more than one elder and ask them for

prayer. Now I understand that we worry about people giving us their illnesses, so don't be offended if your prayer comes over the phone or even as a text or email. These prayers are given in the name of Jesus. And yes, I do carry oil to anoint with if anyone asks or is open to being anointed with oil. So, when we are sick, call for the elders of the church and have them pray over us, anointing us with oil in the name of the Lord. Don't just go to Walmart and get over-the-counter meds or even to your doctor. Yes, do those things, but live into the Word of God and reach out and call the elders for prayer.

Next, James tells us the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Think of prayers of faith as a move from prayer for physical illness to prayer for spiritual sickness that needs healing. Notice James says the prayer of the faithful saves the sick. And notice that confession is associated with these types of prayers. Confession often makes us very uncomfortable as we seek to hide our sins behind the curtain of our masks, thinking we are the only sinner in our fellowship and that if others knew who we really were, they would not love us. But confession of sins and the prayers of the faithful are powerful, transformational moments in our lives. Yes, they are difficult moments when we open up ourselves to others and share the deep inner turmoil that only we and God are aware of in our souls. John Wesley understood both the need for the prayers of the faithful in our lives and our own need for healing from the consequences of our sins. John developed the idea of bands, small groups of 3-5 people who come together weekly, listen to each other, walk with each other, develop trust in each other, and become a safe place to share our deepest secrets with others who pray for us in the name of Jesus. In these small groups are times of confession of sin, speaking in the name of Jesus Christ that a sinner is forgiven and transformation, healing of the sinner's sickness, brokenness, and spiritual illnesses through the prayers of the faithful. The love of a faithful person whom you trust enough to share your deepest secrets with and receive prayer of forgiveness are people through whom Jesus' transformative healing can and does work. We as a Global Methodist Church are to be organized into these small groups and through them, we are to seek to be with each other, love each other, and pray for each other. These bands or small groups are places where the transformative power of Holy Spirit is released into our lives so that we might be more fully conformed to the image of Jesus. These are places where our spiritual wounds can be and are healed. They are places of prayers of the faithful and healing. If there is one gift I could give to any believer in Jesus, it would be the gift of a band, a group of brothers or

sisters in Christ who will walk with them in the power of Holy Spirit and will listen and pray for them in the name of Jesus.

In verse 16, James writes that the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Now I am certain that we all desire our prayers to be powerful and effective, so let's look briefly at what it means to be righteous. At the top level, to be righteous means to be in a right relationship with God. So, we should ask, how do we become righteous? How do we as sinners have a right relationship with a holy God? Now my own response to this desire is to learn about God and what God expects of me and to work hard to live such a life. This is the approach to righteousness Israel tried and which, I guess, the Jewish community is still struggling with today. We have been given the Ten Commandments and all of the Law and prophets that we may seek to keep them and to love God with all of our heart, soul, and might. Many of us will seek to enter into righteousness through behavior modification, striving to become better followers of rules and to improve ourselves so that we might be righteous before God. Let me share with us something I think we all know: we will never be able to become righteous before God in our own strength. It is a little like those New Year's resolutions we make to improve our health and get more exercise, maybe by joining a gym, and only getting there a few times early in January and then never again. If we ever think we are improving our righteousness in our own strength and growing closer to being righteous, we only need to look to Jesus' teaching in the Beatitudes where he tells us if we are even angry with our neighbor, we have committed murder and broken the Law and are sinners. We cannot get there in our own strength; we need something more; we need Jesus. We need a savior who loves us so much that he died in our place so that we might be reconciled to God. To become righteous, we need only believe in Jesus and surrender our lives to him. By our faith in Jesus, we receive righteousness. We, as Paul will describe it, "Put on the righteousness of Jesus." We become righteous before God through Jesus Christ in the power of Holy Spirit. We receive what we cannot earn. We receive that which we cannot modify our behavior to move towards. We are transformed by Christ into one who is righteous before God as we surrender ourselves and let Jesus displace that within us which separates us from God. Receiving righteousness is not encouraging us to sin but encouraging us to turn to Jesus, believe in him, and receive from him the free gift he has for us. When we have received righteousness from Jesus, our prayers are transformed and become powerful and effective.

Finally, James tells us to pray for one another. We have a time of sharing each week to share our joys and concerns and some do. Take time to capture those prayer requests we hear each week and pray for each other throughout the week. Use the prayer calendar that Cindy has made for us at Afton and take time each day to pray for one another. Be open to the guidance of Holy Spirit and when people are brought to your mind, pray for them, and if you can, get in touch with them and see what kind of prayers are needed. Learn the needs of each other in our fellowship and pray for one another. Be willing to be the source of love for others by praying for them. Don't be afraid that we will pray the wrong thing. Remember that Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf and transforms our prayers into what they should be before God. Remember, when we pray for a brother or sister, that Jesus is kind and gentle and so we should also be kind and gentle in our prayers as we pray over and with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Don't hesitate to ask those Holy Spirit has placed on your heart what they want Jesus to do for them and then pray in the name of Jesus for that request.

Let me close with James' words as a reminder of our approach to prayer: "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." Let us open our hearts and receive Jesus, so that we might put on righteousness and be those whose prayers are powerful and effective. Let us strive to become a people of prayer and to make this place a house of prayer.

Pray with me: Jesus, we open our hearts to receive righteousness from you. Help us to receive all you have for us and to surrender more fully to you each day, moving more deeply into your steadfast love. Guide us and empower us so that we might love each other enough to pray for one another. Lord Jesus, come and teach us to pray. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.