

Living Out Love  
I John 4.1-12; James 5.13-20  
September 30, 2018  
Pentecost +19B  
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Let's get the snark and the cynicism out on the table before we go any further with this one. Preacher and writer Danielle Shroyer has already gone and set that table for us thoroughly with these words:

"I don't have any concrete evidence on this, but I think this passage may be in the running to win a 'Most Negative Spiritual Baggage' award. I can personally count a rather alarming number of conversations I've had with faithful people who have felt that they've prayed their hearts out over people they've loved only to see them not be healed. I've also seen my fair share of really terrible theological conclusions and manipulations that are pinned on a few of these verses.

The text starts off well. In fact, if you could somehow find a way to preach just from James 5:13, that would be some solid teaching. Are you suffering? You should pray. Are you cheerful? You should sing out in praise. This one verse covers the wisdom of the majority of the Christian life. The next verse, too: Are you sick? Gather the elders around to pray for you and anoint you. Steady as she goes, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in...oh wait. Verse 15 makes things a bit more complicated.

'The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.' 'Save' here is the Greek word 'sozo,' the same one used for being saved in the more spiritual sense. It does also mean saving in the sense of being physically healed. Many American Christians have tended to prefer the second almost completely to the exclusion of the first.

This is problematic because every single one of us knows someone who died before their time, died in a way that was painful and unfair, died despite the prayers and cries of the holy and the faithful. So the fact that this has been used to create some sort of guaranteed divine healing system stings like a slap in the

face. Sickness and grief and death are pretty difficult without the added baggage.

James doesn't seem to help or clarify matters when he piles on the guilt by comparing all of us to Elijah immediately afterward. 'Elijah was a human being like us!' he says, 'And HE was able to pray so powerfully that there was no rain in the whole wide world for three and a half years!'

Never mind that Elijah was a prophet who also didn't die because he was taken up into the heavens in a fiery chariot. He's exactly like us. He is the most average human being ever there was. You should absolutely compare yourself to him, especially when someone you love is sick and your prayers aren't magically working to fix them. Then you can feel guilty not only for your prayers clearly not being said/heard correctly, but also for not being ELIJAH.

If this is James' idea of a pep talk, I frankly think he fails. There's a veritable mine field of broken hopes and false expectations (and, dare I say it, lost faith) in this passage. Sometimes people are healed, and it is wonderful. Sometimes they do not get any better, and it is hard, even when you have resurrection hope, even when you have faith, even when you're trying your best to pray your sorrows."<sup>1</sup>

I don't disagree with her. In fact, it helps me to hear her words and know I'm not the only one who has a first reaction of "yeah, right" when folks in the Bible get too big in their promises for my human capacity. I know some of you have also been members of faith communities with abusive and toxic theology that blames your faithfulness or faithlessness for the perceived blessings and cursings you experience in your life. Are you #blessed? I absolutely believe in the presence and power and provision of the Divine, but I do not believe our sickness or health is a consequence of our prayer lives. I do not believe our wealth or our poverty is a consequence of the conditions of our hearts. I think we can look to D.C. and recent Senate hearings and be keenly aware that wealth and health exist ably without any mention of the goodness of God.

Yes, this text can be full of starry-eyed promises, bad medical advice, and theological abuse when we are set up to be more than human. But I'm not ready to throw it out. I fully believe this text can be redeemed from the ways 20th century preachers in the

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<sup>1</sup> Danielle Shroyer, "If This is a Pep Talk, I Give it an 'F'", <http://thq.wearsparkhouse.org/featured/ordinary26bepistle/>

West abused it. We've named the landmines, so let's set that aside and come back to the text. How might God bless us in the reading and the hearing of this Word?

Our first best answer is always the same: Context. What is going on outside of these verses? James has been laying out an argument for this listening community of faith to be different than the world around them. Most immediately, in the verses preceding today's reading, he rails against wealthy landowners who oppress their workers, don't pay fair wages, don't pay the wages they have promised their workers for work already completed, who have hoarded their wealth for themselves as though it will protect them, who have "lived on earth in luxury and in pleasure, and fattened their hearts in a day of slaughter." And this is not a "Come on, fellas, you can do better than that" kind of text. No, James starts out clear and bold, "Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you...Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you! (James 5.1, 3)"

It seems to me that he's saying blessing is not where you think it is. Wealth and oppressive power are not signs of God's blessing and provision. He is not being subtle here or leaving much room for excuses to bad behavior and selfish living. You may be swimming in gold now, but it is fattening up your heart for the slaughter.

Then, he takes a breath. And he speaks to his audience, "Be patient, beloved." You are on the right path. You are giving yourselves to the better way. Stick with this! While you are resisting the ways of oppression, while you are resisting those who oppress you, while you are resisting the pull of a culture that devalues lives based on skin melanin and gender presentation and financial portfolio, while you are resisting a culture that says boys will be boys and women's voices don't really matter, here's what you can do.

You can pray. You can delight. You can support each other. You can bless each other with oil. You can care for your sick and care for the earth. You can encourage each other when one of you is tempted to give up on the absurdity of this Jesus path. The path that says we are all connected and must carry each other and be mindful of those who are weak, sick, oppressed, ignored, at the margins, isolated, lonely, falling and failing. Together you can resist the siren song of dominant culture lest you fall into the far less demanding ways of caring about yourself and those in your closest circle while you tune out the unpleasant suffering of the world.

Friends, maybe he's not setting us up for failure at all but begging for us to grab hold of each other because he knows we can't do this alone. He knows we will want to give up and walk away. He knows the work is tremendous, the odds are not in our favor, and the bravery will take a tribe of friends and believers and pray-ers and coffee makers

and singers of songs and anoint-ers of oil if we ever stand a chance of grabbing the megaphone, stepping into a spotlight, and speaking our powerful truth to oppressive power. If that's the step you want to take, then you best be bathed in oil and prayer and songs of praise. You best be covered by the love of your people and the Spirit of God. You best be bathed in the ways of Christ Jesus himself who commanded us to love so fiercely that everyone will know we are his.

That's why we needed a second epistle reading today. What is the way to which we are called? What is the way that shapes us? What is the way that makes the path before us?

"My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can't know him if you don't love." 1 John 4.7-8

We don't faith alone. We participate in each other's lives of faith with prayer and laughter and blessing and friendship. Because we believe in the presence and provision and power of God, we live those things out for each other right here and now. When someone needs to be fed, we feed them. When someone needs to be held, we hold them. When someone needs you to take their face in your hands, look them in the eyes, anoint their tears with oil as you whisper, "You are not alone," we do that, too. And guess what happens? The presence of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the path of Jesus the Christ are made real and true and evident through our lives. We live this love out. Together.

Amen.

As we stand to sing our closing hymn, I will be at the front with some oil in my hands. If you need a reminder and blessing that you are not alone, I will be ready to receive you.

Blessing

May you know (forehead)

May you hear (earlobe)

May you feel (hands)

That you are not alone (chest at collarbone)