

With and For
James 5:13-20
September 26, 2021
First Presbyterian, Luling

As I think I've told you before, I'm an introvert. While that technically means that I get my energy recharged from being alone rather than being with other people, what it looks like is that I like to be alone a lot. I don't mind doing things by myself; in fact, lots of times I prefer it. That's not to say that I don't like people, or I don't like being with people or doing things with people, just that I can't do that all the time.

During the times of quarantine and social distancing, which wasn't even a term we had ever heard a couple of years ago, we've all learned a little bit more about ourselves—about our tolerance for being alone for long stretches of time, or on the other hand, being with our families for long stretches of time. Or, being separated from people we wanted to spend time with and not separated from people we didn't want to spend time with.

There are activities we might prefer to do alone. I have a long list of these. Read books. Write sermons. Go hiking, even though that's not really advisable. Clean the house. Cook. Wash dishes. All things I'm just as happy to do by myself. Your list might not be so long, or completely different.

There are activities that we could do alone but are much easier, or more enjoyable, to do with another person. Move a mattress—much easier with another person. Eat a meal—usually more enjoyable with someone else.

And there are activities that you simply can't do alone. Play football. Water ski—though having someone else there doesn't make me suddenly able to water ski. Put sunscreen on your back. Give or receive a hug, which is something people living alone have tragically experienced during the pandemic.

Where does prayer fit into this schematic I've created? Is it something we'd prefer to do alone? Is it an activity that can be done alone but is better if someone else is around? Or is it something that we can't do alone at all, something that requires other people?

There are different places in Scripture that give us instructions about prayer—about what to say and how to say it. For today, this section of the letter of James falls somewhere between my last two categories: prayer might be something you can do alone, but it's way better if it involves someone else, and it borders on requiring other people. Prayer is something, James tells us, that we do

with and *for* other people.

These are James's closing words to the letter, and he's encouraging his readers to pray. And not just to pray for themselves, nor by themselves, but for each other, and with each other. Prayer is his prescription for just about any situation, which is not a bad idea.

Are any among you suffering? Pray.

Are any among you cheerful? Sing songs of praise. That's another way of praying.

Are any among you sick? Call for the elders of the church and have them pray and anoint with oil.

Confess sins to one another.

Pray for one another.

This list starts out sounding like prayer is something that is well done alone. If you're suffering, pray. If you're cheerful, pray in song. Those are things you could do alone. I think we have an ideal of someone praying in solitude, able to shut themselves off from all outside influences, just some individual time with Jesus. And that sort of prayer is certainly valuable, and necessary, and found in Scripture. But prayer in solitude is only one kind of prayer, and I don't see in Scripture that that type of prayer is better or more effective or more important than any other kind of prayer. It's one kind of practice, but not the only kind.

Even James's examples of suffering and cheerfulness, of individually-focused praying, fall into the category of "you could do it alone, but it's better if there's someone else to share it." If you're suffering, it's hard, really hard, to not be able to share your suffering with someone else. We need comfort from another human—I think that's how God made us. And on the other side, if we have good news—if we're cheerful, James calls it--then we want to share our good news, too.

After those two instructions, James gets further into his idea that we should pray *with* and *for* each other. If you're sick, sure you can pray for yourself. But he says call the elders of the church, so that they can come pray for you and anoint you with oil, which is a well known ancient healing practice, well beyond church circles but also widely practiced within the church. James is assuming that there is a church, and that the church would have elders chosen, clearly not just for the administration of the church, but as spiritual leaders.

And then he instructs his readers to confess their sins to each other. And to pray for one another. This is reciprocal, mutual. A model of a church community, in which people trust each other enough to confess their sins and ask for prayer,

to give prayer, to share prayer.

James paints a clear picture of the community of faith, of the church. Part of what the church is to be about is prayer. And it is prayer with each other: with those who are sick and suffering, with those who are sinful—which is everyone--, with those who are cheerful. And it is prayer for each other, on behalf of the other, prayer because someone else needs it.

One of the purposes of our church, then, what our church is to be about, is prayer. Prayer with and for each other. We do this well in worship—we pray together in all kinds of ways, about all kinds of things, in spoken word and in song, in silence and in action, in person and through the internet. I'm so grateful for all of that.

Something that James doesn't say, but that I think is important, is this: sometimes we don't feel like praying. Sometimes we don't believe our prayers are useful, or heard, or do anything. Sometimes we can't pray because our suffering and sickness are so great. And that is when we most need each other to pray for us, to uphold us when we can't do it ourselves. We can count on each other to pray for us—not just and "I'll pray for you," but an "I'll pray for you now because I know you can't manage it yourself, and I know that when I need praying for in that way, you'll do it for me." I'm so grateful for this too.

We pray with and for each other. We pray with and for the world. We pray when others cannot, and we are prayed for when we cannot. James instructs us to pray with and for each other, and so we renew our commitment to do just that.