

Pray For One Another
a sermon by Heather Thomsen
James 5:13-18
January 24, 2016

I'd like you to consider two different moments in your own life. First, recall an experience when you felt courageous, when you acted on behalf of someone who was vulnerable, or when your action required daring, nerve and chivalry! Perhaps you even risked your own safety in order to ensure someone else's.

If you've seen the Lord of the Rings, it's hard to forget the scene in which Boromir, the Captain of Gondor, stands in front of a barrage of enemy arrows to help the hobbits Merry and Pippin escape. Boromir sacrificed his own life for them.

I'm guessing your act of courage wasn't quite to the level of Boromir's. But I'm sure you've had your own experiences of pluckiness and valor! With your own courageous act in mind, I'd like you to recall another memory. Think of a time you felt weak, vulnerable, or helpless, maybe you failed to do something you know should have done.

Our hero Boromir experienced weakness, too. Shortly before his heroic stand before the army of orcs, Boromir lived through a moment of complete failure. He broke a promise, he compromised the mission he was on, he tried to seize power for himself, and betrayed the very person he had vowed to protect. In the Fellowship of the Ring movie, Boromir is shown laying in the forest with arrows protruding from his chest as Aragorn, the king, comes running to him. As he lay dying, Boromir remorsefully confessed his failure to Aragorn.

As you recall your own experiences of strength and of weakness which stands out as the more difficult experience? I suspect that it may have been harder for Boromir to confess his failure than it was for him to fight single handedly against an army of orcs. The exposure of our weakness is a very vulnerable thing.

We don't like weakness. We like being strong. We like being brave. In fact, we overcompensate for our weakness by giving the impression that we have it all together. Or, alternatively, we pull away and try to prevent our weakness from being seen. I confess that I have demonstrated both of these mentalities. I have insisted that I am fine, that I don't need anything, that I'm going to make it. I've also tried to pull away so that no one can see my pain, my fears, or my insecurities. But friends, I want to assert to you today, that both of these reactions could hardly be more opposed to the values of the kingdom.

For the past few weeks we have been studying various New Testament passages that highlight the values that make up the church. We've been guided by Jerry Sitter's book which surveys 12 virtues in the DNA of the church Jesus longs for. We have looked at the importance of welcoming one another, and of forgiving one another. Today we look at the call in James to pray for one another. I would like to suggest that the practice of praying for one another is absolutely vital in shaping both individuals and communities into Christ-likeness.

I should warn you that the summons to mutual prayer is a challenging one. It's challenging in a way that is very different than Boromir's sacrifice for the hobbits. It requires vulnerability and admission of weakness and failure; it requires humility. I think that at times this summons to pray for one another might be one of the most difficult things Christians are called to do. And that demands a very different kind of courage.

So if you're feeling brave, let's turn together to our passage in James 5.

One thing that strikes me about these verses is that praying for one another roots individuals and entire communities in God's action. Let's flesh out the first few verses and see what this looks like. First we need to take a nerd tangent into the original Greek, because understanding what's going on in the Greek will actually help us grapple better with these verses. Let's examine the meaning of the words "trouble" and "happy" in verse 13. The NIV translates, "if anyone among you is in trouble ..." I don't know where your mind just went, but I'm suddenly picturing a kid who got busted with her hand in the cookie jar, or a guy who has been audited by the IRS for cheating on his taxes. But the situation here is not rule breaking or stirring up trouble. Perhaps a better translation would be the word, "suffering." James seems to be referring broadly to enduring through hardship, and the summons here is for the suffering person to petition in faith for God to act. The person who suffers is called to lean into God's action, to trust that God will help. The prayer of the suffering person is rooted in God's action.

The word "happy" in verse 13 is similarly misleading. "Happy" makes us think of someone skipping around in a sunny meadow chasing butterflies or riding roller coasters at Disneyland, but that's not what is going on here. A better translation might be "encouraged." The Greek word here is also used in Acts to describe Paul's exhortation to sailors who have been shipwrecked. Keep up your courage! Paul says to them. The same idea is true here: "has anyone among you been encouraged? Let that person sing songs of thanks to God." The exhortation is to take courage or take heart, and this only makes sense against the backdrop of hardship. Verse 13 is not a contrast between suffering and the good life. Instead it's a picture of a community that is undergoing persecution or suffering. Among that group, there are some who are struggling and there are others who have taken courage. And the exhortation to both is to pray. Those who are struggling are called to petition for God's help. Those who have taken courage are called to give thanks to God for the strength God has given them to carry on. It's basically giving God credit for the works He's already done. In both instances, the prayers of the people in this community reveal reliance upon God's action.

We see this same thing playing out in verse 14: "is anyone among you sick? That person should call for the elders of the church to come and pray." And the prayers of the elders, we see, are offered in faith trusting that it is God who acts, God who raises up. The act of praying for one another is an act of entrusting one another to God, and depending on God's action to bring about courage, perseverance and healing.

Praying for one another centers people in God's actions, and that cultivates dependence on God.

So maybe you're thinking, what's so hard about that? I mentioned earlier that praying for one another might be one of the most challenging things Christians are called to do. Here's why I think it's hard: praying for one another requires vulnerability, which we are not naturally inclined to do. The person who is suffering has to acknowledge it - It's an admission of weakness. The person who thanks God for the courage to endure is admitting that she is not, actually, strong enough to have endured without God's help. It's an admission of not being good enough. The person who is sick and asks for prayer is reaching out for help, acknowledging that his body is failing. It's an admission of frailty. Even the people who are doing the praying must acknowledge their own lack of ability. By appealing to God as the one who strengthens and heals, those who are praying for healing admit that they are powerless to do anything to accomplish that on their own. Praying for one another forces us to acknowledge our frailty and our powerlessness. It forces us to depend on God. As strong, self-sufficient people, I think that relying on God and being vulnerable with one another is incredibly hard for many of us to do.

But this posture of vulnerability toward one another is essential in Christian community, because, just like dependence on God fosters Christlikeness, so does vulnerability. Our passage further reveals this need for vulnerability by talking about confessing sin to one another.

Yes, I said "confessing sin to one another."

Did your heart just start racing? It's ok to admit if it did. This verse leads us into waters that seem deep and dark, maybe even shark infested. We don't like talking about sin, and we definitely don't like the idea of confessing our sin to one another. If I'm honest with myself and with you, confessing my sin is terrifying. And I think it's precisely because confession forces me to acknowledge that I'm not good enough, that I have messed up and that I *am* messed up. In a world that values achievement, excellence and perfection, confession reveals all of the ways we fall short of those ideals. In a world that values beauty, confession reveals our ugliness. No wonder it is so terrifying. Confession touches on our deepest fears. If I reveal this darkness inside me, will I be rejected? Will I be ostracized? Will people see the truth about who I really am? We hide behind masks of strength and excellence and competence because we're trying desperately to cover the depths of our weakness and failure.

Imagine you're crammed in a car with some friends, you're driving to Raleigh for a concert, and suddenly one of the tires goes flat. You and your friends have a decision to make. You can either acknowledge the flat, and get out of the car to do the work to change the tire so you can eventually continue on your way. But if you do that, you might be late to the concert. Or, you can keep going and pretend like nothing happened, hoping that you make it safely and on time, in spite of the flat tire that everyone is aware of but no one talks about. Sin is like the flat tire. If it goes unaddressed, it will never be fixed. And, if it goes unaddressed, not only does it create falsity in the community, it can also be damaging.

AA and other 12 step groups understand this so much better than the church does. AA is founded on the idea that utterly honest, completely vulnerable relationships are vital to healing. This is why people in 12 step groups introduce themselves by naming their sin. "My name is Heather. I am an addict. Or, I am an alcoholic." They name it. Straight up. No hiding behind vague statements or ambiguity. And the community celebrates by clapping when a person is able to name their sin, because they know what a huge breakthrough that is toward restoration. And there is no judgment because everybody is fighting the same battle .

Friends, we are all fighting the same battle. Sure, it looks different for each of us. Some of us have abused power to gain advantage. Some of us are perfectionists who hide behind our work. Some of us have deep battles with sexual sin. Some of us are in marriages that are collapsing despite our best efforts. Some of us lie about who we really are to avoid being rejected. Some of us cheat. Some of us steal. Some of us wish we had never been born. We are all fighting the battle of being weak, sinful people who fail, but who are too afraid to admit it. We think honesty about our failure is optional in the church and so we pretend to be perfect. But Jesus makes it clear that in his community honesty is not optional. In fact, it's the only way toward healing.

The consequences of sin make it difficult to talk about it. The process of owning your own failure, twistedness, and darkness can be deeply embarrassing. Sin is so hard to talk about because it can be so hurtful and so damaging. Paul writes in Romans that the consequences of sin lead to death. We feel this, don't we? We experience the ways that our own transgressions, the wrong choices of others, and the systemic injustice of our world strike fatal blows to relationships and to people's physical and emotional health. Given how hard it is to own our sin, why would we ever subject ourselves to the potential of humiliation or rejection by naming it? The answer is staring at us from verse 16.

The first reason to name our sin is because confession leads to healing. Confession is not for the sake of submitting to judgement. It's not punitive. And, as someone who is prone to judging others, let me remind myself and remind us all that judgment has never been our job. Judgment belongs to God alone. Sin certainly bears consequences, yes. Sometimes those consequences can be painful. But consequences and judgment are not the same thing. May God have mercy on me if I respond in judgment to the confession of another person. Confession is for the sake of restoration. In the act of confessing to one another and then praying for one another we are opened to the work of the Holy Spirit. Jerry Sittser writes that confession exposes our sin and brokenness; prayer gives us access to the healing power of God. And I love this part of it: this work of healing extends beyond the individual to the whole community. As individuals experience wholeness, so do their communities.

We see this vividly in the earliest expressions of the church. The practice of confession was rigorous and taken very seriously in the first centuries of Christian community. Sins were often acknowledged publicly at the initiative of the individual. This is because the early Christians believed that all sin - even private, individual sin - affected the whole community. But public confession was always, *always* for the sake of healing and for the eventual restoration of the sinner into the life of the community. Confession had behind it the desire for reconciliation, and for a lasting change of heart.

Yet, as we grapple with the idea of public confession, it is important to recognize that it does have limits. We need to be discriminate about the details we share, and the people with whom we share. Not everything should be said, and not everyone should be told. If the goal of confession is healing, the process of confession must be centered on that goal, and should avoid unnecessary details that might get in the way of that process. Confession is for the sake of healing.

Verse 16 highlights another reason we are to pray. It's because prayer is effective. When a person prays, trusting that God can indeed act, those prayers are effective. Prayer works. I said earlier that praying for one another cultivates dependence on God. This is true here, too. We know that God is the only one who can bring new life and restoration. We *have* to depend on God for that. Praying for other people lifts them into the presence of this healing God. Prayer is effective.

Jerry Sitter writes that confession may be the single most important practice for the church to become a community of authentic love and humility. Confession levels the playing field in the church, exposing both the weak and the strong to be sinners in need of God's grace. And it is in this mutual embrace of weakness and humility that we are formed into individuals and into a church that more authentically reflects Christ.

So here's the catch. We think of Jesus as this mighty Savior, as the King who conquered the powers of sin and death. He's a hero! This is what we often focus on when we think of growing into Christlikeness. But we forget the humiliation Christ endured on the cross, we forget that he suffered, we forget that his vulnerability was exposed for the entire world to see. We simply cannot grasp the depths of humility that he embraced by giving up his glory and wrapping himself in our frail flesh.

We aren't called to be heroes. We are called to identify with Christ's suffering, and to acknowledge our utter weakness, which is the only thing that allows us to rely fully on God's strength. Praying for one another and confessing our sin to one another, as terrifying as that can sometimes be, enable us to depend on God's strength and experience true humility. It is precisely in the difficult, vulnerable act of revealing our weakness by praying with and for one another that we are formed into people and into a community demonstrating the Christ-like virtues of humility and dependence on God.

Let's be brave together, friends. Let's be strong enough to be honest about our weakness. Let's be courageous enough to let others see our fear. Let's be vulnerable enough to admit that we aren't good enough. Let's be graciousness enough to accept one another in our weakness. And let's pray fervently for one another that we might experience healing and restoration. That's how people will see Christ in us.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Amen.

Sermon summary/ Big Idea

Although one of the most difficult things for Christians to enact, the practice of praying for one another is vital in shaping both individuals and a community into Christ-likeness. Prayer roots people in God's action, and it is the primary channel for restoration and healing within an individual's life and within a community. Yet praying for and with one another is challenging because it requires humility, vulnerability, and acknowledgment of weakness/failure. It is precisely in the difficult act of revealing our weakness by praying with and for one another that we are formed into people and into a community demonstrating the Christ-like virtues of humility and dependence on God.