

Sermon for Pentecost XIX
September 30, 2018
James 5:13-20

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

In a recent conversation with Vicar Woodside, he indicated that one of the surprises early in his vicarage is the degree to which people are dealing with grief and sorrow, especially related to death. This week had its share of death. There were at least three fatal crashes in North Dakota, one of which I assisted with the death notification to family. Our son, Andrew, had his first funeral as a pastor in Groton, SD, yesterday. A pastor friend in Iowa, and his wife, buried their preborn twins who died in the womb. Suffering is all around us. We suffer with physical health matters, emotional breakdowns, emotional and financial stress. Where do we turn?

The prayer of a righteous person has great power. James has opened the door for us to talk about prayer and remind us what a tremendous privilege we have in approaching our kind and loving Lord with our cares and concerns. Luther's Small Catechism helps to clarify this wonderful gift of prayer.

We pray because God has commanded it and has also promised to hear and answer our prayers. Yes, prayer is both a command and a privilege. It is a privilege given to those who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We don't deserve this privilege. By nature we want nothing to do with the Lord. As sinners, we would rather live for the moment, seeking pleasure and comfort at every turn. We are the ones who deserve to have a millstone hung around our neck and be thrown into the sea. What we deserve is the unquenchable fire of hell that Jesus talked about in the Gospel reading. And yet, Jesus is the One who experienced true suffering in our behalf when He suffered and died on the cross. By His coming to life again on the third day He has won for us the privilege of having an intimate relationship with our Heavenly Father.

The Bible tells us that prayer is simply speaking to God in words and thoughts. It is a heart to heart conversation with the Lord. He is eager to hear from us as the prophet Isaiah declares. **Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear.** We do so with full and complete confidence that He hears and answers each and every prayer. He tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children. He always has our best interest in mind, even when our rational mind arrives at a different conclusion.

The Bible also directs us to pray to the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are not to pray to idols, saints, or anything God has created. Saints who have died with faith in Christ are in heaven, seated with Christ in glory. Nowhere does Scripture tell us that they can hear or answer our prayers. So prayers to Mary, Peter, Andrew, or any other saint is a fruitless endeavor. They can't hear you.

We also pray according to God's revealed will. Jesus certainly set the tone for us when He prayed, **"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from Me; yet not my will, but Yours be done."** All too often we grumble and complain when the Lord doesn't seem to answer our prayers in the way that we want Him to. Perhaps we have forgotten to look for direction and insight from His Holy Word in the context of our situation. Life in this world is not about us. It is about honoring our Lord and serving our neighbor.

God the Holy Spirit prays with us and for us. In Romans 8:26 St. Paul writes, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." There are times when we are on the cusp of breaking, feeling overwhelmed and fragile. "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." IS 42:3 What a comfort to know that when we are hurting so deeply that we cannot even put our prayers into words, the Holy Spirit steps in and groans in our behalf.

God hears and answers the prayers of all Christians and answers them in His own way and at His own time. St. Paul writes, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.” (2 Corinthians 12:8-9) The Lord wanted Paul to continue to find His true strength in the Lord and so the answer to his prayer was no. In our reading we heard Elijah’s prayer. He prayed for it to stop raining, and it did not rain for three years and six months. Then he prayed again and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. We pray that God’s will be done and trust that He will accomplish His will through us.

For whom shall we pray? We should pray for ourselves and for all other people, even for our enemies, but not for the souls of the dead. Is there someone with whom you are having animosity? Just seeing that person makes your blood boil. Everything they do or say drives you crazy. When was the last time you offered a prayer for them? What was the content of that prayer? Do you truly have their best interest in mind? They may have sinned against you. Are they aware of it? Have you gone to them personally, and in love shown them their sin in order that your relationship might be restored? The hurt that you experienced may have brought bitterness to you that caused you to sin against them. Paul reminds us again, **“Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”** (v. 16). We confess our sins to one another and to God who is the source of forgiveness and healing through the shed blood of our dear Savior, Jesus. Broken relationships and destroyed lives are ultimately healed through the healing salve of God’s Word of forgiveness and new life.

In our Bible study this morning, we will discuss intercessory prayer. We will see how praying for others can be a blessing for ourselves. In humility, we lift up the cares of others and witness how the Lord gives answer to those prayers.

Sometimes we get stuck, not sure of just how to pray. What words are the right words? There are many sources. Open to the Psalms. It is filled with heart-felt prayers of praise and thanksgiving, of brokenness and confession, of sorrow over seemingly impossible situations. Lutheran Service Book is filled with prayers. Page 305 and following include prayers at worship, prayers for home and family, prayers in times of need as well as in times of joy.

Or pray a hymn. Here is one that is new to me. It's 754. *Entrust your days and burdens To God's most loving hand. He cares for you while ruling The sky, the sea, the land. For He who guides the tempests Along their thund'rous ways Will find for you a pathway And guide you all your days.* The hymn ends with this verse. *Our hands and feet, Lord strengthen; with joy our spirits bless. Until we see the ending of all our life's distress. And so throughout our life time Keep us within Your care And at our end then bring us To heav'n to praise You there.* Pick up the new Portals of Prayer. There are daily devotions and prayers, or I'd be happy to give you other resources. Pray from the heart. Whatever format you choose, the Lord wants to hear from you.

Pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. We can pray with confidence knowing that our Lord loves us and will provide for our every need. He has proven His love for us by virtue of His suffering and death on the cross. Because Christ was forsaken by His Father on the cross as He bore the punishment for our sin, we can know and celebrate that no matter what happens in this life, He will never abandon us. Our Lord Jesus invites: "**Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden**, and I will give you rest." The Father accepted Christ's sacrifice and raised Him to life on the third day. He has forgiven our sins and made us heirs of heaven. Whether we are going through a tough time or are celebrating a great victory, we rejoice in the fact that we are able to approach our Lord with complete confidence that He will hear and answer all of our prayers until that day when we will see Him face to face in heaven.