



Praying Matters

SCRIPTURE:
James 5:13-16

August 22, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Who is the God we encounter when we pray? James 5:13 reads: Are any among you suffering. They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.

Several years ago, I was invited to be the speaker for the presbytery of the Yukon's winter youth retreat. We met at a camp outside of Anchorage. It was February. It was Alaska. It was really cold. I was assigned a cabin by myself that was not well insulated and they provided a sleeping bag for me—the mummy-bag kind where the only part of me that was showing was my face. Even then, I could still see my breath as I was trying to fall asleep. In the middle of the night, I heard a loud banging on my door and, not wanting to get out of the sleeping bag, I yelled, "Who is it?" A young voice answered, "Rodger, you have to come out here!" "Why?" I remember asking. "There's something you have to see! It's amazing!" the young voice answered. "You mean come outside?" I asked. "Yes! It's amazing," said the young voice again. I slowly got out of the sleeping bag where I had just begun to get warm. I was still fully clothed. I remember thinking to myself, "What is amazing is that you're making me go outside in the middle of the night in February in Alaska. That's what is amazing."

I opened the door and the cold hit me. There was a young woman standing there stomping her feet. She said, "Come on. You have to see this!" Then she led me down a trail to the frozen lake. I kept my head down following her through the snow and ice and soon realized that much of the camp was gathered in the middle of lake. When we got to them, she said, "Isn't it amazing?" And I said, "What?" And she laughed and said, "Look up!" And I did

and it took my breath away. There, dancing above our heads, were these strips of bright neon lights. It was as if a curtain was hanging in the sky and every once in a while, the curtain would move and with each ripple, the colors would change—bright blues and greens and reds and yellows. Everyone was laughing and oohing and aahing. It was spectacular. And then one young man yelled, "You go, God!" And we all cheered.

When we pray, we are praying to the maker of the universe. The God of the northern lights and the God of the subatomic particle. This is the God who is attentive to us. To you. To me. To us all. Imagine that! With all that God has to do, when we pray, God stops and is attentive to us.

Why do we pray? James 5:14 reads: Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray with them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

Prayer is direct conversation with God. It is our talking not *about* God but *to* God because God is both transcendent—out there and immanent—right here. There have been so many hard scenes this week. Desperate, terrified people in Kabul. Destroyed neighborhoods and towns in western Haiti. Intensive care units filled due to COVID. Adults yelling at each other in school board meetings about wearing masks. Fires in the West. We pray because we need God's healing. Because we want to be made whole.

Twice a week we publish the prayer list. Every morning, I pray through the prayer list for those who have died and their loved ones, for those who are in the hospital, in rehab, in hospice. For those serving our country in the military, for those serving on the frontlines of this pandemic, for all those

who have asked for prayer for any reason. I know a number of people do the same thing every day. My constant prayer: God's healing and wholeness for us all—for the creation. James says, "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." All of us need healing and wholeness. All of us need anointing.

What happens when we pray? James 5:15 reads: The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

James says, "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven." That's an amazing thing. It's why we pray a prayer of confession every Sunday. When we pray, God attends to us. And listen to this: When we ask for God's forgiveness, God forgives but not only forgives, God forgets! In Jeremiah 31, God says, "and I will forgive their sins and remember their sin no more." As human beings, we do our best to forgive but we cannot really forget. God does that. Once we pray asking for God's forgiveness, God forgives and forgets. Whatever guilt you may carry, whatever shame you have with you, when you die and come face to face with God and you mention that sin, God will look at you and say, "I have no memory of that." Every time we pray our confession together, every time you pray individually, God forgives and God forgets. That's the power of prayer.

The Lord's prayer. We pray this prayer because Jesus taught it to his disciples. This appears in two of the four gospels. In Matthew 6 and in Luke 11, Jesus gives us this prayer and tells us to pray this. That's why we do it. This is not new to many of you but here are two things that I find remarkable every time we pray this.

The first is Jesus telling us to name God as our father. Jesus uses the term relationally and it's real for us because it was real for him. Jesus uses it here as an endearment. To our ears, the term "father" sounds rather formal. For Jesus, it is not. It is akin to our saying, "Papa" or "Dad" or "Daddy." And we

address God in this way because we are all God's children. Isn't that powerful?

Second, we Presbyterians pray the word "debts." Other traditions use "trespasses" and "sins." To an extent, they are interchangeable but for us, we prefer "debts" because it's the best translation of Matthew 6. It means something is owed. "Trespasses" actually appears later in the passage and "sins" appears in Luke's version. For us, it's not just that we have sinned, it's not just that we have done something we should not, it's that our sin causes us to be indebted to God, which is why God's grace is such a gift.

When I pray the Lord's prayer, I always have my hands open to show I am open to the Holy Spirit. So, friends, I invite you to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

What happens to us when we pray? James 5:16 reads: 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.

James closes his instruction to us about praying matters by saying, "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." Did you hear that? When we pray for others, we are healed. And our prayers, the prayers of the righteous, are powerful and effective.

American mystic and trappist monk, Thomas Merton, when asked if he thought that his prayers changed God, answered, "When I pray, I do not pray to change God. I pray that I might be changed." We pray not to change God in some way but that we would be changed. That we would align ourselves more with God.

In his remarkable book, "How God Changes

Your Brain,” neuroscientist Andrew Newberg did brain scans of Catholic nuns and Buddhist monks who had spent years in prayer. Compared to the normal human brain, the scans of the nuns and monks revealed a striking difference. The part of the brain that focuses on self was diminished and the part of the brain that focuses on others was enhanced. Prayer changed their brains.

Thomas Merton says, “I do not pray to change God. I pray that I might be changed.” When we pray, we are more attuned to the presence of the Holy Spirit. We are more aligned to God’s activity in the world. We are truer followers of Jesus.

One more thing. When I was teaching at Columbia Seminary, I would regularly encounter Justo Gonzalez. Justo is an amazing church historian and a United Methodist. His wife, Catherine, was on our faculty at Columbia. At one faculty meeting,

Catherine asked us to be praying for Justo and for her because Justo was scheduled for surgery the next week. I saw Justo later on campus, greeted him, then told him, “Justo, I’ll be thinking about you next week.” Justo smiled and replied, “Of course you will. You are a Presbyterian.” “I’m sorry?” I said to him. Justo said, “You’ll be thinking of me because you’re a Presbyterian. If you were a Methodist, you would be praying for me, not just thinking about me.” When I told him I meant that I would be praying for him, he asked me why I didn’t say what I meant. Since that encounter, I have stopped saying, “I’ll be thinking about you” when I actually mean “I’ll be praying for you.”

Listening matters. Actions matter. Words matter. Praying matters. Practical wisdom from James. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.