

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“The Power of Prayer”
Thomas G. Speers III
Ordinary 26—September 30, 2018

Lessons: James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them. The prayer of faith will save the sick. Pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

One of the joys of being a part of the church of Jesus Christ is that at our best we are a community that is grounded in prayer.

Here in this church, I rejoice about the times I’ve seen and heard about your care for each other—praying for each other in times of need. The prayer might not have ended your suffering, but it changed that suffering. What a privilege to be part of a community that continues to celebrate and practice the power of prayer. And our prayer is not simply that we be healed of our diseases. Prayer holds our community together. Mark Douglas writes that “prayer for James is not a private matter. Instead, it helps to shape a particular kind of community in which people are committed to each other. The sick call for elders to pray over them. Sinners confess to one another. The cheerful sing. For James, the community that prays together stays together—which is no small feat when there are so many things that can divide a community.”¹

One of the problems with prayer is that we don’t always get what we want. One child told me some years ago, that he had tried to pray and it didn’t work because he didn’t get what he prayed for. I pray that he has since discovered that God is not as Dr. Fosdick once wrote, a “cosmic bellhop” flitting about as a servant to our whims. “The presence of God is not captive to our expectations and appointments. There is an old saying which is quite prevalent in African American churches that embraces this view: ‘God may not come when you want God. But God is always on time!’”² Do you remember the soldier’s anonymous prayer? “I asked for strength that I might achieve; I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey. I asked for health that I might do greater things; I was given infirmity that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy; I was given poverty that I might be wise. I asked for power that I might have the praise of men; I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God. I asked for all things that I might enjoy life; I was given life that I might enjoy all things. I got nothing that I had asked for, but everything that I had hoped for. Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered; I am, among all men, most richly blessed.” Basically, it is an earlier version of what the Rolling Stones used to sing: “You can’t always get what you want. But if you try sometime you find You get what you need.” Are any among you suffering? They should pray.

Sometimes we don’t pray because we don’t want to be a bother to God or because we just don’t know what to say. Ann Hallstein writes of a time when she was a hospital chaplain and was called to the Emergency Room, where a resident told her “an eight-year-old boy had been brought in by his mother in a taxicab, shot in the head by her boyfriend or former boyfriend. The boy had no chance of surviving, but the team was working on him, while his mother and aunt sat nearby in a tiny closet of a room. When I opened the door to join them, fear pounding in my heart, I saw two tiny

¹ Mark Douglas, James 5:13-20, Theological Perspective in Feasting on the Word, Year B. Volume 4. © 2009 Westminster John Knox Press.

² James Melvin Washington, Prayer in the Midst of Crisis, in The Living Pulpit Vol 2, No. 3 July - September 1993. © 1993.

girls—not women, girls—teenagers of indeterminate age, clinging to each other, as vulnerable and alone as I had ever seen anyone look. They were in shock, obviously. I introduced myself, sat down, and had no idea what to do next: any words I could think of seemed not only insufficient, but profane. What could anyone possibly say to comfort a child whose own child was lying in the next partition, dying of a gunshot wound to the head? While I fumbled and tried to react in some appropriate way, the door was thrown open and a large woman, about 6'2" tall, stepped in, filling the room with her presence. She grabbed the two sisters up by crooking her massive arms around their necks and pulling them to her, calling them her babies. (She was, I should add here, their neighbor, simply their neighbor). And then, in a commanding voice full of authority, she ordered Jesus to come into the room "right this minute, come in here, Jesus, my babies need you, and they need you now, I don't mean later, I don't mean in ten minutes, I mean NOW! Get down here! Come into this room and comfort these babies! Jesus, Jesus, get in here now, there's nothing anyone can do but you. As I looked on with wonder and great admiration, I felt the energy in the room change; calm came over all of us, and the mother stopped crying and moaning. Their neighbor continued to hold them in her viselike elbows, rocking them both back and forth. I stood up, put my arms around them all, and joined in the rocking. We swayed there together in one mass for 10 or 20 minutes, I suppose—I had no sense of time, nor of place: all I felt was the love of this woman, and the love of God that she had so forcefully, and so effectively, called into the room. She soon left, but the palpable sense of love and comfort remained long after the few minutes of her presence. Prayer? You bet—the most immediate, most effective and most powerful I've seen. I could tell that what fueled her, what "made it happen" was that she was fully present, totally open and full of both love and faith. She was there, she summoned God there, and it was her presence that invoked the healing needed at that moment. Everything was not "all right"—there was not a happy ending—the boy died that night. But God had been called and had been with the suffering mother and aunt, and they felt it, and were able to function, and to survive that horrifying scene."³ Don't be afraid to ask God for help and sometimes if you don't have the words, your presence is all that is needed. We need you Jesus. Come down here right now!

Here at Green Hill, we gather on this fifth Sunday of the month to celebrate the reality that God's desire for us is that we all might know a life of wholeness, as expressed in the life and ministry of Jesus, who came that we might have life and have it in abundance. So we pray for each other and invite any who wish to come forward for a time of prayer and for the laying on of hands.

God's healing purpose and the promise of God's fulfilling and sustaining love is for every one of us. Whether you choose to come forward or to remain seated in prayer and concern, God can use your presence in this service. May God bless us all with lives of wholeness. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

Let us pray: Mighty God, you rise with healing in your wings. Help us to be the people you call us to be: a people of prayer, of action, of hope and compassion, that we might discover in our own lives the power of prayer. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

³ Ann Hallstein, Presence as Prayer, in The Living Pulpit.1993 Vol 2 no 3 Jul - Sep 1993. © 1993