

**A Sermon for Every Sunday**  
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**James 5:13-20**

If you've been reading James along with the Revised Common Lectionary, then you know that he's been teaching us about what it means to live as followers of Christ and as friends of God. We've heard James speak before, as he speaks today, about *speech itself*. He is quite concerned about the dangers of language and the damage people can do with what we say. On the other hand, he suggests that we can bless one another, when we speak in ways that reflect our faith in God. Here at the close of his letter, James encourages his community to direct their speech *TO God*. Individually and together, James urges them to pray.

The epistle of James is the wisdom literature of the New Testament; it describes how Christians are meant to live wisely in the world. James says: Wise people speak to God. Wise people pray.

That makes sense to me, yet I confess: the first part of today's lesson reminded me how *many* religious leaders have encouraged their congregations to pray in ways that have seemed distinctly *unwise*. Like all of those who recommend prayer instead of medicine ... who say there's no need for things like vaccines and surgeries, when we can just ask God to protect us.

One of my favorite articles during the height of COVID was by an evangelical Christian named Francis Collins, who was, at the time, head of the National Institutes of Health in Maryland. Collins said, "Give God the glory, but roll up your sleeve."<sup>1</sup> He commended the COVID vaccine *not only* as a scientific solution to a medical problem, *but also as an answer to prayer*. He said a lot of science went into the vaccines, but a lot of prayer, too! Imagine faithful scientists bending over their test tubes and microscopes, with the awareness of God's presence and asking for God's help. Imagine secular scientists, whose work is supported by the prayers of people like you and me. How does God *answer* our prayers, Collins asked? Often by giving an opportunity *for people to come to our rescue*. And these people can do God's work, whether or not they worship God. Remember Jesus advising his disciples to be open-minded about who was on "their side"? Jesus encouraged them to receive and even celebrate the work of people *whose actions conformed to Jesus' character*. Folks who were healing the sick and giving cups of water to the thirsty: they were of God, even if they didn't follow Jesus.

James didn't offer prayer as an alternative to medicine, or faith as alternative to science. Science and medicine weren't part of his worldview, as he thought about paths to healing. James offered prayer as a way faithful people could connect to their sovereign and compassionate God.

Now, it might be said that James' theology of prayer was not especially consistent or well-developed. He encouraged people to pray to God, because he believed God would hear and respond to those prayers. But ... *did prayer save, or did Jesus save? Was the salvation of God*

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<sup>1</sup> [https://baptistnews.com/article/francis-collins-give-god-the-glory-for-vaccines-but-roll-up-your-sleeve/?fbclid=IwAR3opfhCCL\\_o-SLuE9lbnLJf\\_DR8AMtF6cEMnZ7wGWEFNLdGkZ2O-UAuGhc#\\_YUths2ZKhkP](https://baptistnews.com/article/francis-collins-give-god-the-glory-for-vaccines-but-roll-up-your-sleeve/?fbclid=IwAR3opfhCCL_o-SLuE9lbnLJf_DR8AMtF6cEMnZ7wGWEFNLdGkZ2O-UAuGhc#_YUths2ZKhkP)

contingent somehow on the prayers of the faithful? Which was more important: God's compassion and will to save the world, or human fidelity and the persuasiveness of human prayer?

A theologian named Mark Douglas got me to thinking about this, and suggested we remember James was one of the first followers of Jesus to try to write about things like this. The early church was still developing its ideas about so much of the Christian life. What's clear is that James and his community believed prayer was significant and powerful, able to bind human and divine activity together in such a way, that it became hard to see where one ended and the other began.<sup>2</sup>

I appreciate Mark's sympathy for the earliest Christian theologians, but wonder: are we any closer to having "figured out" prayer today? The theologian Wendy Farley wrote about intercessory prayer recently. She admitted *we have no clear idea about how the universe works and whether or how prayer might affect outcomes*. She said, "Hardly anything could be more [obvious] than the fact that disastrous events occur even when a million or more people pray to be spared them. Millions of Africans were transported to the Americas. No one's prayers protected them from slavery. Millions of Jews, [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] folks, and others were lost in the Holocaust, and the millions of prayers lifted] to avert disaster could not compete with the force of evil set against them. Young mothers die of cancer. Black men are shot without cause, and their killers are exonerated. Children remain at the mercy of their abusers. [So we] cannot think of intercessory prayer as a magical charm that enables us to obtain a desired outcome ..."

"[Still, ... amazing and unexplainable things sometimes occur in conjunction with prayer.] We may witness moments of deep presence [and] divine aid, succor, guidance, clarity, assistance. There are studies that suggest that people who are prayed for, even by strangers, have a greater statistical chance of surviving their hospitalizations. We need not dismiss the power of these experiences," Farley said.

She continued, "I have no theories about prayer, other than to observe these contradictory good and bad events. I do not think we need to understand how prayer works. I suspect clinging too hard to a particular theory of prayer may interfere with the actual practice of prayer. [Then she quoted an ancient theologian who said the best gift (the best *outcome*) of prayer is *to converse intimately with God and be preoccupied with God's company*. In that case, to pray is already to have prayer answered.]<sup>3</sup>

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James saw prayer as important for individuals, as it connected them to God, and also for communities, as prayer connected members to one another. How can prayer function in the lives of the faithful? I've had a random week; I'll share some random musings.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Douglas, I think in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B Volume 4.

<sup>3</sup> Farley, *Beguiled by Beauty*, 114.

One thing prayer does is remind us who we are. Womanist Theologian Cheryl Kirk-Duggan has written about that. In particular, she's written about the *spirituals* that slaves sang, and how their songs show that *these enslaved people knew who they were, despite the institutionalization of slavery*. They knew they were fully human in God. They knew they were cherished by God, children of God. And they sang to affirm their being and to survive their predicament. Kirk-Duggan says the enslaved people's litanies of praise and their litanies of protest reflected the real merciful justice they *knew and had experienced* in the God who cared for them.<sup>4</sup>

Folks who are not African-American cannot sing and experience those spirituals in the same way that victims of slavery and racism do. Yet here's a truth that can apply to people who suffer all kinds of grief and oppression: the truth that *prayer reminds us who we are*. "Prayer holds us open to the mercy and justice alive in God, even when the relief we crave is withheld."

Lisa Sharon Harper tells a story about praying in community – and a time she experienced the mercy of God, even in the midst of great grief. Lisa went to the bedside of a dear friend named Richard who had suffered a massive heart attack. She'd had been scared to go the hospital, scared by coming *that close* to her friend's vulnerability and his probable death. Yet Lisa *did not let fear guide her*; she followed God's Spirit of love. When she got to the hospital, Lisa found several friends and family holding vigil at Richard's side. They prayed together throughout the day.

As they prayed together, it gradually became clear to the people gathered around Richard that *God was going to do a miracle*. "It was one of two kinds of miracles," Lisa realized. Either God was going to raise Richard up, like Jesus calling Lazarus from the tomb. Or God was going to release Richard from his broken body and welcome him home, so the miracle of Richard's life would be complete.

No one knew which miracle it would be ... yet the spirit in that hospital room became a sweet spirit of peace Lisa could only explain by the presence of God. Richard's sons played their father's favorite music. They held his hands. They joked and prayed and waited. And when Richard finally died, they wept and held one another. They shared a cedar ceremony, traditional to the Lakota tribe, of which Richard was part. They read his favorite Psalm. They did a round dance encircling his body. They told stories about Richard late into the night. Lisa said those moments were both devastating and sweet.<sup>5</sup>

Wendy Farley says prayer can open us to the presence of God, who holds us and the world in profound and mysterious ways. "One part of us can be terrified or grieving or angry or broken-hearted. But another part of us can experience a consolation that accompanies these feelings, not deactivating them but making them more bearable."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This and the next quote, Farley, 115.

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel*.

<sup>6</sup> Farley, 116.

The prayers my congregation *sings* sometimes are a particular source of consolation and peace for me. The youth of the congregation sing these prayers in an evening service called Compline, which is part of the Episcopal Prayer Book. They offer one petition after another, and the congregations sing in response. Over and over we sing: Lord, have mercy. I love the repetition, and the way we sigh our prayers, each time more deeply: *Lord, have mercy*. I read a description of someone praying that said, “He prayed as he breathed ... holding in his heart, like broken birds in cupped hands, all those people who were in stress or grief.”<sup>7</sup> Our prayers have that quality: we hold people in our heart, like broken birds in cupped hands. We lift them to the Holy One, praying for mercy.

Our petitions are for a wide variety of beings. We begin by praying for all people in their daily life and work – for families, friends, and neighbors, and for those who are alone. Different people come to mind different weeks: the cashier at the grocery store, your mail carrier, that family who walks their dog at dusk, nurses in the ICU, your uncle who’s sick: *Let us pray to the Lord. Lord, have mercy*. We pray for this community, the nation, and the world ... all who work for freedom, justice, and peace. We pray for the just and proper use of God’s creation, for the victims of poverty, fear, injustice, and oppression. With each petition, there’s a rush of images, maybe ... Congress calling for a vote, firefighters confronting a blaze, college students protesting for climate action or a ceasefire in Gaza, migrants lost at sea. We all have met different people and read different stories so for each of us what comes to mind will be different. We pray for the peace and unity of the Church of God, for all who proclaim the gospel, and all who seek the truth. We pray for people who are in danger, sorrow, or any kind of trouble ... for those who minister to the sick, the friendless, and the needy. With every prayer, we are reminded: God cares about *all* of these people, even all of creation. We remember our interconnectedness. And when we finally name the needs and concerns of our own congregation, and the prayers of *our hearts*, our own prayers are part of this vast constellation.

Sometimes this awareness of our connectedness ... or the gentleness nurtured in us as we lift our fellow creatures to God ... or what? (I don’t know; this is the mystery of prayer) ... *IT CAN MOVE US to join God in caring for the world*. Prayer can be part of what enlists us to share God’s love for the world and God’s work in the world. Then we become what that scientist, Francis Collins, envisioned. We become the answer to someone’s prayer.

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<sup>7</sup> Ellis Peters, as quoted by Farley, 113.