

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 21
Year B

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29
Psalm 19:7-14
James 5:13-20
Mark 9:38-50

As we wrap up our look at the letter of James, it might be good to look back at the main points James emphasizes in this letter. Many scholars point out that this is the only wisdom book in the New Testament, comparing it with Proverbs. They also point out that this epistle is short on theology - it doesn't dive into how we should view God or how it all works. However, as we shall see, the reading this week changes that assessment. But first, a quick review of what James does say.

James admonishes us to be active in our faith. He tells us to be doers of the Word, not hearers only. We are to put our faith into action - something you do well. He states that true religion is shown through our care for orphans and widows and to remain unstained from the world. He expands on this by asking how we treat others. Do we show partiality to some? Do we give the best seats to those who are important while shunning someone we feel is beneath us? James concludes this section with the statement that faith by itself is dead if there are no works.

Chapter 3 is devoted to warning those who teach, which is all of us. He claims that words matter, and not just the words we use, but the tone of our voice as we use those words. This ends with a question, what is the source of the conflict among you? Is it from coveting what your neighbor has? Our good works should be born of a sincere desire to help our neighbor and not from the motivation of what we might receive in return. James points out the true source of that negative action - the devil. We are to resist the devil and he will flee from us. If we draw near to God, God will draw near to us.

With that quick review, we come to the conclusion of this letter. This is the point where James does get into theology. To answer his next question, we must turn our attention to the two main concepts of God - God is compassionate and God acts powerfully in the world. Without these convictions, the rest of the letter is meaningless. That is because James ends this letter with a note about prayer. If we do not believe that God cares about us enough to act upon our requests, we are wasting our time. But James give us direction for our prayers.

To begin, we need to look at the connection between sin and sickness. While modern science has explained the source of illness beyond the ancient belief that it was caused by sin, there are similarities in how we react. Both illness and bad behavior have a way of causing us to be isolated from our community. We saw this with the COVID pandemic - isolation of the ill, and we see it with incarceration of those who break the law. There are also those who carry guilt about their illnesses - maybe if I had eaten better, or gotten more exercise, or hadn't done some activities in my youth I wouldn't be suffering now. Guilt can be as debilitating as any sin.

How does James tell us to deal with these things? Pray. Prayer and praise, which is a form of prayer, should be our natural reaction to anything in our life. On Wednesday evenings, we pray for those who are ill and praise God for the good reports we receive. This is exactly what James is encouraging us to do. He also tells those who are sick to act - to call for the leaders of the church to come anoint with oil and pray. I have often said I am the last to know when someone is sick because few call me when they are going into the hospital. James puts that responsibility on the one who needs prayer - let people know.

The next point on the list James gives us is probably the most difficult - confession. Yes, we say the General Confession each Sunday, but James is proposing something a little more difficult. We are to confess our sins to one another and then to pray for one another. Admitting that we have made a mistake is tough enough, but to confess that we have done wrong to a brother or sister is next to impossible, but that is what James is urging us to do. Whether it is a formal confession using the Rite of Reconciliation of a Penitent as outlined in the Book of Common Prayer, or just a heartfelt conversation with a trusted friend, confession is always a good place to begin when we feel our faith is suffering due to our actions.

James ends his letter with a note of encouragement. Through prayer and praise, we can impact the lives of those around us in a positive manner. Whether it is through encouragement in times of struggle, or a pat on the back when things go well, we are lifting up our brothers and sisters. God does have compassion for us and does act mightily in our lives. We only need to open ourselves to God through prayer.