

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

PRAYING HARD TO GET BETTER – BUT DOES THAT MAKE US WELL?

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21)

James 5:13-20

Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

13 Is any one among you suffering? Let him pray. Is any cheerful? Let him sing praise. 14 Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; 15 and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects. 17 Elijah was a man of like nature with ourselves and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth its fruit.

19 My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 20 let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

DIAGNOSIS: Working at Getting Better

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Dying to Get Better*

James takes it for granted that everyone, even Christians, succumb to sickness, suffering and waywardness. The question becomes how to get better. It's easy to get the impression reading James that getting better depends on what we do about it – such as performing his laundry list of rituals. Number one: Pray. Number two: Call the elders. Number three: Anoint with oil, and so on. Do this, do that, and God will respond positively. Not only will sickness get better, but other symptoms of dis-ease will improve too. This pragmatic attitude is reflected in the oft-repeated response we give when we hear someone is ill. We say, "I'll pray for you."

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Killing Ourselves to Get Better*

Look how powerful prayer is! Why, Elijah was able to stop the rain for three and a half years! "The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects" (v. 16). But what makes prayer powerful? Where – in what or in whom – is our trust located? Is it in the fact that prayer itself has been pronounced "powerful," therefore the more prayers the more power? Is it in the fact that as righteous people God is obliged to answer our prayers? How many people, including us, have we heard make this profession of unfaith: "I believe in prayer"? Aren't we actually knocking ourselves out in fervent prayer because we trust that our prayers will help us and others get better, as if the act of prayer itself activates healing?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Getting Killed*

Faith is only as powerful as that in which (or in whom) it is located. As far as God is concerned, putting faith in prayer is mislocated faith. Granted, scientific studies have proven that

prayer has a positive effect on healing. Many do get “better” in the short run. But in the long run, their souls still end up dead. And what a surprise to find out that it is God, the critical judge, who is doing the executing!

PROGNOSIS: Made Well: Saved/Healed

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Healed/Saved

The sweet news of the Gospel which James only alludes to [at least that is what we hope he is doing!] is that even before we’ve decided to pray about it, the Triune God is involved in our healing/saving. (The Greek word for “healed” can also be translated “saved.”) Although James doesn’t mention it [we will], the grounds for our healing/saving are the actions of the second person of the trinity, Jesus, who voluntarily accepted and absorbed our execution himself, thus simultaneously “saving” and “healing” us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Killing Ourselves the Right Way (Repentance)

Now the third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit takes over and induces us to absorb that healing/saving into ourselves. She succeeds when she is able to wrench our trust away from false gods (such as “the power of prayer” or our own efforts) and instead posits our trust in Jesus. This said, now James’ points are well taken: “Confess your sins to one another” (v. 17), he advises. We transfer our trust to Christ, and consequently engage in the agony of confession and repentance (that is, a dying to ourselves) as an act of faith. Notice how our profession changes from “I believe in prayer” to “I believe in Jesus Christ”?

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Spreading Health

When James says, “The prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up” (v 15) we understand that this prayer is rooted in Christ-trusting and therefore results

inhealing/salvation. Such confidence causes us to be on the lookout for the dis-eased, the sufferers and wanders among us—so anxious are we to spread around this lavishhealing/salvation. Watch especially how our tone changes. Instead of just speaking TO God, as we do when we say, “I’ll pray for you,” we actually become audacious speakers FOR God. We pronounce, “Brother, Sister, your faith has made you well!” There’s power aplenty to be sure, but it is the power of the crucified and risen Savior.