

## “Risking Faith”

James 5:13-20 & Mark 9:38-50

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I'd like to tell you a story about Betty – Betty was a friend of mine when I lived in Phoenix. She was what you would call one of the ‘pillars of the church’ in the congregation I served there – she had helped found the church in 1950 and had been a member most of her adult life. When I knew her she was well into retirement and still into everything – leading and singing and teaching and supporting, and making crafts out of yarn cross-stitched onto that plastic canvas stuff...she made a lot of that stuff! Betty was a saint – she died some years ago now and has gone to be with her Lord – she IS a saint. She was cheerful and an encourager – lots of joy. But Betty also carried around with her a deep wound in her soul – a hurt she had received, which at some point as we got to know each other she trusted to share with me. Betty's husband had died of cancer just a couple of years before I met Betty – and as he suffered and declined, Betty prayed for him – she prayed to God for healing, for the cancer to abate – Betty cared for her husband faithfully, tenderly, as the cancer spread – and she prayed fervently to God – and the cancer took his life. And then someone told Betty this: that if she just would have had more faith, then her husband would have been cured; if she just would have had more faith, God would have answered. Those words wounded Betty deeply... but was that the truth? The problem was her lack of faith? Had she failed her husband with feeble prayers? Prayers deemed unworthy by God?

How do you hear that story? If you agree with what that person told Betty, then I disagree with both of you; I disagree strongly – I heard what Betty told me as sad, as outrageous – I felt angry that someone would say that to such a faithful woman in such a tender time. So when I come to this passage in James, I just want to be clear it is very personal for me – when James writes ‘pray for the sick – the prayer of faith will save the sick – the prayers of the righteous are effective...’ – I know of people who have been harmed by those words – maybe it is personal for you too.

But regardless of my particular experience or yours, or how people have used the passage, there it is still – this passage from James; I suppose we could ignore it – although after reading it I did say it was ‘the Word of the Lord’ – and you said ‘thanks be to God’ – there it is. And it being God's word, I suppose that's why some people also run to it so strongly – declaring that this is about a test and measure of faith – and then marketing healing to those desperate for it.

Well – let's not run from this – or run rampant with it – let's take a risk beyond what has been done with this passage, and with our own faith find God's word there. And as we do that, I want to notice a few things with you. One thing to notice is that there is no doubt a particular slice and experience of prayer that James touches on here – prayers for specific situations in which change in human events are connected to prayer – an interplay of faith and God, of power and mystery; it is a gift from God that people have experienced throughout the story of faith and history. Thanks be to God.

Another thing to notice is that James talks here about much more than just praying for sick people to make them better – James also talks about praying when you are cheerful (that's what songs of praise are – prayers); about praying when there is suffering in life; about praying when there is sin to face; AND then praying for the sick as well. James speaks of prayer as embracing all of life, not just one slice of it.

Another thing to notice is that James does not only or mostly talk about being healed – the broader focus is on being saved...that is the language James uses for various needs – “saved.” That's a word we attach a lot of meanings to in Christian circles and in our own faith

journeys – but what I want to say about “saved” is that here it points us to a meaning of being held securely by God – of abiding fully in God’s grace – of being connected to, dependent on God’s presence and power for wholeness and true life...that’s what “saved” is about, and it’s the lens through which James sees prayer and life connected.

So when you notice those things – what we see is that James’ essential message for life is simply this: PRAY – why pray? In order to be saved? NO. In order to claim, and proclaim, and believe and affirm the reality of what it is to be saved? YES – to abide fully in God’s saving power and presence – to be held in the truth of the wholeness God has given to us. There are times we are not cured of sickness- whether through prayer or treatment, either/both – but there is never, can never, be a time when we are not saved...no illness or sin or suffering has the power to take that away from you or me, because it is God in Christ who saves – and that is a healing given, deeper and stronger than any cure. Is that watered down? – diminishing or dancing around this promise of prayer James speaks of? – NO – I believe that truly is the deeper reality given to us here and that speaks to our lives- abiding in God’s saving power in all of life.

Well – that’s some intense stuff – so let’s lighten things up a bit and just turn for a moment to the Gospel lesson instead. What we find there is...fights about casting out demons – and Jesus talking about drowning yourself in the sea, and about cutting off your limbs and gouging out your eyes – and then he throws in some hellfire and worm images for good measure. If you thought James was intense – how about this? Well, with images like that - clearly this is a good passage for a baptism Sunday – right? Well it is – not because of the images themselves but because of the issues at hand: what’s going on here is that the disciples are worried about protecting their turf, but what Jesus is talking about being saved – that’s what’s important. Jesus speaks of the little ones – and that IS a baptism image – but it’s not just little babies, it’s really an image for anyone who is seeking to find their way in life. Sounds like all of us; and that it is the responsibility of followers of Jesus to say to those seeking their way – to say to ourselves and to others - that the ways of life rather than death are what we focus on. And when dealing with life and death, there’s no space for being lukewarm or cautious, and certainly no room for struggles for power and privilege – better we would be cast into the sea; cut off limbs; feel the fires of hell – because what Jesus says we are to be about is abiding in the Kingdom of God.

Hmm – well, when I hear that – this hellfire and millstone passage on a baptism day, I think it pushes us right back to James; because I think what it is telling us with these little ones – Liam, Anna, Kory – is that we need to pray – to pray, as James tells us, in all circumstances, so that we will nurture them in the truth that their lives are part of the kingdom of God. When these children are thriving – pray with praise; when they are struggling – pray for wisdom; when they are sick – pray for health; when they are wayward – pray for forgiveness and direction; when they have faith – give thanks; when they doubt – pray in belief for them. When – whenever – PRAY.

Baptism is our confession that we are not our own, but that our children, we, life belongs to God – and so baptism is a prayer that bathes all of life in that truth – baptism is a prayer that immerses us in the mystery and power that we are saved – saved by God’s grace in all circumstances; and whatever happens in life, nothing can change that. But the thing is, our trust and belief in that does change – and that’s why we pray – to place our lives again where they belong, where they already are, in God’s saving power.

I mentioned before about taking a risk and believing there is blessing in those words from James, even if they have been used for harm – that was personal for me, and perhaps for you too. But when we bring these passages from James and Mark together on a baptism day, what is revealed is that the true risk for us is to not see the deep need for us and our children to live in the saving power and peace of the Kingdom of God – to teach our children and selves otherwise

is dangerous stuff – calls to mind millstones and severed limbs and fire-y consequences. That's not there to scare us or our children – there's enough within us and around us in our world to make those images quite understandable; what it is meant to do is to bring us together as a community in Christ around the saving power of God, for us, and our children – for our neighbors and world.

Together – as community: for Jesus, for the church that followed him, the things we've touched on today were never meant to be individual issues, and baptism certainly isn't either. Times of plenty and of suffering, of sickness and of sin, of power and of weakness, of praise and of need are not things we are meant to receive or struggle with or deal with on our own – and so we pray, together – and together journey in the saving power of God.

Betty – who I told you about in Phoenix - the thing I think I admired most about her, is that she kept praying. Even when things didn't go as she wanted, even when someone told her she didn't pray well, even when she wasn't sure how or why, she kept praying and praising and believing and struggling and forgiving and blessing. She prayed for my children at their baptisms and for all the children of the world - just as we do so for these children and our world today - because she knew that all she knew was the saving power and presence of God.

May God give us such faith to be such saints - praying for these children and ourselves and our world in all things – believing God's saving grace in all things. AMEN.