

September 27, 2009

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

James 5.13-20

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons (preacher)

We don't hear much about the epistle of James. Martin Luther, in particular, disliked the book so much he tried hard to have it expelled from the canon. Though he was unsuccessful in his attempts, the book seems to have gotten a bad rap, perhaps for the directness of speech or for its emphasis on good works as marks of justification.

The truth is, James is a powerful witness to the Christian community of its time and really of any time. James doesn't pull any punches. Written in some of the finest Koine Greek of the Bible, James argues elegantly and convincingly of the moral imperative of every Christian, of commitment to community and to Christ.

In our reading this morning, James again presents some rather outrageous ideas.

Visit the sick? Lay hands on them? Preposterous!

In the culture in which James was writing, those who were sick or poor or both were folks to steer clear of. Health, after all, attracts health. Wealth attracts wealth. To hang out with THOSE folks would bring such things upon your household.

In that culture, the poor and the mentally or physically sick were set apart -- ostracized, really. Like stayed with like and didn't mix with the likes of THEM.

So for James to infer that not only should a faithful Christian *think* about a sick person but should also *pray* for a sick person and – heaven forbid it—*lay hands on* a sick person, it was likely a bit hard to swallow. James compels his community, the Christian community, to open wider the doors of the church, to build the walls further and further out, to encompass more, to love more, to pray more.

This was probably not popular.

Luckily for us, we don't have these same issues. Or do we?

We Christians do go out into the world. We clothe the naked, we feed the hungry, we lay hands on the sick, we comfort the afflicted. We work for peace, we pray. We do these things because our Gospel tells us to do so.

That is what “we Christians” do. But how many of us are really doing them with our own two hands? We are a big church, almost 3,000 strong. And I can tell you for a fact that there are not 3000 people here today worshipping. We haven’t seen that many in adult formation or volunteering with Threads or getting the e-care prayer emails. And we are a strong, vibrant Christian community, committed to living out the Gospel in the world.

It is not enough for a few people to go and lay on hands. It is not enough for just a few of us to learn about our scriptures. It is not enough for just a few of us to go out and preach the Gospel in story and in action. It is not enough for just a few of us to clothe the neediest or hold hands with the loneliest outside our church doors.

The responsibility of the Christian community, everyone in the community, James tells us, is to do these things as expressions of the grace we have already received from God. We are blessed with belovedness and we must proclaim that blessing in our thoughts, words and our deeds. All of us, not just a handful of representatives.

We do not do this because it leads to our own salvation. We do not proclaim the gospel in order to win something for ourselves.

Our prayers for the sick, the friendless and the needy, those prayers do not make us loved. God loves us whether we deserve it or not. We are loved by the very nature of our being God’s children. We pray BECAUSE we are loved. We pray, or we should pray, as James implores us, for healing, for forgiveness, for thankfulness, for joy. We pray because we are forgiven, loved, and free.

No one is outside of that forgiveness and no one is outside of that love. Exclusivity is a human construct, not a Godly one.

And so we pray for everyone.

Prayer isn’t what you do when you have no other options, or nothing more can be done. Prayer should be the people of God’s first response in every situation.

We pray in our hearts, with our words and with our hands. We pray as individuals and as a Christian community of faith compelled to do so by a God who loves us unconditionally. We pray with our words and with our actions.

We are called to be a people of relentless and passionate prayer, each of us, all of us. Not one of us is released from duty for caring for those inside and outside our community. That is what Christian community is about, following the example of Christ and the instructions of the apostles in taking the Gospel out into the world to heal it.

So go forth, my friends, go forth into the world and pray with your heart and with your soul. Pray with your words and with your actions. Pray deeply and passionately and pray without ceasing.