

Proper 21B: James 5.13-20

September 29, 2024

The Rev. Scott Walters

Maybe I'm not the only person in this room who has struggled with the problem of intercessory prayer.

I was reminded of the struggle on Tuesday night, when Campbell McLean made the mistake of telling me that his uncle Shaun had recently taught him how to drive a stick shift. Campbell apparently didn't realize that that if you tell such a thing to a man of a certain age, you're inviting a detailed description of the car he learned to drive in. Which might have been a blue 1972 AMC Hornet Sportabout station wagon that wasn't a stick shift per se, but did have a manual transmission with "three on the tree," as we used to say.

The prospect of teenage drivers has been driving parents to their knees in prayer for generations, of course. But this is not the kind of intercessory prayer that '72 Hornet reminded me of. It came to mind because we prayed for that car. During our nighttime prayers, we prayed for a reliable used vehicle that a family dependent on one young college professor's salary could afford.

I've spent much of my life since then thinking that praying for things like automobiles is foolishness or maybe worse. I came to question praying like that, in part, because within a few years, my mother's vision began to blur and balance became a challenge, the early symptoms of what eventually would be diagnosed as multiple sclerosis. And I assure you that there were dozens, if not hundreds of faithful friends who prayed fervently for years that Mom would be healed of that cruel disease. But she wasn't. So a god who provided low mileage station wagons to families from time to time but couldn't seem to get around to healing my mother made no sense at all to me. I gradually stopped believing in intercessory prayer, and I gradually stopped believing in a god who was active in any meaningful way in our world at all.

That's more than enough autobiography for one sermon. But I think lots of people, even those who never stopped praying for God to provide for their daily bread and ordinary provisions, like reliable transportation, a good job, healing for themselves or for someone they love ... lots of people have had as hard a time as I have making sense of intercessory prayer. Does it work? If so, how? And why? Why would a God who could heal, choose not to heal until we get our requests filed just right? As if praying were akin to anxiously sliding my paperwork to the clerk at the DMV, hoping everything's in order so I'll finally be rewarded with tags for my station wagon.

So, whatever your experience or your theology of prayer might be, what are we to make of James's confident instructions? "Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up..."

James says we should be praying for all kinds of things in our lives and that things will be different when we do. Especially if we say these prayers in community. Where did his confidence in the power of prayer come from? Had he lived an exceedingly sheltered life or had he not been paying attention? Or maybe his world and his God were just very different from ours.

Before we dismiss dear old St James completely, consider this. If prayer really is one of the ways we impact each other's lives, is it necessarily any more problematic than all the other ways

God created a world in which we matter to one another? If the occasional answering of prayer makes God seem unfair, is it not also unfair that a child who is touched and loved and read to at bedtime will thrive in ways that will come more difficultly to one who has not. If I speak to you in ways that are cruel or demeaning or emotionally abusive, is it fair that God has made a world in which this may eventually give you stomach ulcers and insomnia and maybe worse? Or, to turn it around, is it fair to the lonely that the kindness of a friend or the care and concern of a stranger can bring your heart rate down or ease a fear that's immobilized you? I don't know if it's fair that we live in a world in which we matter to each other in ways like these. But we do, don't we? We just do.

So perhaps we should reconsider how we imagine the God we pray to, rather than walk away from the practice of intercessory prayer altogether, just in case it really is one of the ways we matter to each other. Maybe one of the ways we matter to the rest of creation as well.

Recently I watched an interview with an English Catholic priest and theologian named James Alison. James Alison happened to be the last person to preach in our Lenten Preaching Series in 2020 before that pesky pandemic you were praying so fervently would end quickly shut everything down.

The first question the interviewer asks him is simply, "Who is God to you?" Alison pauses, looks searchingly up at the ceiling, and opens his arms wide when he says, "[God is] the utter, utter aliveness behind everything. That has come into everything, as Jesus. And whose Holy Spirit is between all of us." Listen to that definition of God again with some curiosity about how it could affect how we think about prayer. God is the the utter aliveness behind everything. That has come into everything as Jesus. And whose Holy Spirit is between all of us. That's a rather different image than God as grumpy agent at a heavenly DMV, isn't it? Is it so foolish, then, to think that learning to present the deep desires of our hearts ever more fully to that Aliveness might change things in ourselves and in our world in deep and powerful ways?

The interviewer pressed James Alison further on what the Holy Spirit of God is that inhabits the spaces between us. So he elaborated. "Think of it like this. If two people are locked in a rivalry, the pattern of their desire is such that they will grind each other down further and further. And each one of them thinks their desire is their own. But, in fact, it will be something that is pulling them both apart and destroying them. And it will look to the outsider as though it is something independent. It's as though something weird got them and then they went into self destruct. And the Holy Spirit is exactly the reverse of that. It is something that is altering the pattern of desire between us. Which is actually recreating us as we go along..."

God as aliveness itself. God's Holy Spirit as living and moving in and even hallowing the space between us. Why couldn't it be that presenting our deep desires and our nagging anxieties, presenting our souls and bodies to the aliveness behind everything and the mystery that lives in the space between us ... why wouldn't it be that opening ourselves more fully to a God like that might be healing to minds and bodies, to friendships and to families and so much more. It might not heal always or even often, and it may never heal us completely. Incompleteness seems like part of the human condition. But this particular Christian is coming to believe again that James was right. Prayer really is one of the many ways we matter to one another. One of the many ways God has arranged this creation so that what you do or think or pray over there has a meaningful impact on my life over here.

I don't know whether there's a prayer that can fend off the rain for three and a half years, as Elijah's was said to have done. Honestly, I hope not, because that could really go sideways, don't you think? I do know that what fills the space between us can be as different as friendship is from

war. As different as sickness is from health, and life from death. And the consequences of how we enter and attend to that holy space can roll across decades and generations.

In fact, in all my fretting to make sure intercessory prayer makes sense to my little mind, I've overlooked two little lines tucked between James's instructions that the suffering should pray, and the sick should call the elders to anoint them with oil. "Are any cheerful?" He asks. "They should sing songs of praise." Did you notice that? Singing when you're cheerful is as important a prayer practice as asking God to heal a friend or turn back the rains that are flooding her home.

Perhaps the question James is pressing upon us all is simply, "Will you turn your attention, turn your desires and your fears and your hurts, but also your joy and your hope and your gratitude, will you practice turning ever more of yourself and your life toward the aliveness of God that lives between us? Such turnings, such prayers, such intercessions really do still have the power to heal."