



The Westminster Pulpit

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“What Power You Have” **Sermon on James 5:13-20**

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James 5:13-20

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; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months, it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth yielded its harvest.

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Jesus is God! Jesus is human. I need Jesus to be human. I need someone who knows the grittiness of life. I need someone who knows what it’s like to get frustrated when you can’t recall the name of, “You know, what’s her name?” I need someone who knows what it’s like to be overlooked. I need Jesus to know what it’s like to be misunderstood, to be dealt with unjustly. I need Jesus to know what it’s like to find a new body ache. I need Jesus to be human so as to understand us.

But if Jesus were to walk into this space right now, I need Jesus to be God because I’ve got a list of things that need to be fixed. Don’t you have a list? An ailment that needs healing, a

relationship that needs to be in relationship. A past that needs salvation, a future that could use a little hope.

I suspect we all have a list, and one of the reasons we gather here on a Sunday morning is to share our list with God in prayer. The other reason is that we hope to share our list with one another. We need God to hear our list, but we also need a human who understands. And the human who understands often is what brings us to God.

I think of that story in the gospels about the four friends of the lame man who carried him to see Jesus. They picked him up off his mat and carried him to the home where Jesus was staying, but when they got there, they couldn't get in. It was a popular place to be - like this place is on Christmas Eve at 5:00. The late arriver walks down the aisle at 4:50 with the hope that someone would let him squeeze in, but the coming of the Christ child in no way rules out our belief in the Survival of the Fittest. On Christmas Eve! The crowd keeps us from Jesus. But that doesn't stop the four friends.

The four friends had seen what was on the list of the one whom they carried. And the crowd did not deter them. They somehow got onto the roof of the home, dug a hole in the roof, and lowered their friend in front of Jesus. Four people who probably had their own list of needs. "Lord, could you fix..." "Lord, could you fix..." "Lord, could you fix..." But their list didn't matter because they had a friend who needed God more. They knew his list and they brought him to God.

James wrote: "Are any among you suffering?" Every human being in the church raised a hand. They needed God.

The other day, we had the memorial service for Rees Messier, a young man 24 years old who died of NF, the elephant man's disease. Instead of the tumors showing up on the outside of his body, they showed up on the inside of his body, strangling his organs and nerves. When Heidi and I sat around the table to listen to some Rees stories, Kelly, Rees' sister-in-law, shared about how a few weeks ago, Rees texted her to ask, "How are you feeling?" Kelly, who is pregnant and works as a nurse, texted back that her feet hurt and back hurt, and then she remembered, "Rees, who is in so much pain, days to live, is wondering how I'm doing?"

Rees wondered... "Are any among you suffering?" It's a God thing to take your eyes off of your own sufferings and look to the other so that you can have someone for whom to pray.

James wants us to know that every human action causes a God reaction. If you're suffering, pray. God reaction!

"Are any of you cheerful?" They should sing songs of praise. You didn't make this day, God reaction!

"Are any of you sick?" They should call for the elders of the church to pray. God reaction!

Whenever I hear those words of calling the elders, I think of Alfred Heasty, who lived across the street from us in Morganton.

Alfred was a retired missionary in Africa. Alfred knocked on my door one day and said, "Donovan, I have just been diagnosed with an aggressive cancer, and I would like for you to call the elders of the church together to anoint me with oil and pray over me." He said it, and I asked myself, "Do Presbyterians do that?" Well, the ink on my seminary diploma wasn't even dry when he told me what he wanted. And being a good Presbyterian, I didn't pray to get an answer; I looked it up in the Book of Order, and sure enough, it was in there.

In the Morganton church, the elders would gather after worship every Sunday to accept new members. We didn't have a six-week new members class. We liked to get them in before they could think about it.

Well, that Sunday, I said to the elders. "Folks, Alfred Heasty has cancer and would like for us to anoint with oil and pray over him." They said, "Do Presbyterians do that?" I said, "Of course, we do that! It's in our Book of Order, for Pete's sake."

So, they gathered and prayed. We anointed Alfred with oil and prayed over him. I am so happy that it happened so early in my ministry. It was powerful to witness the presence of God in that room.

About six months later, I said, "Alfred, I'm sorry that our prayers weren't answered. He said, "They were answered. I was scared. I'm not scared. I'm not worried. I'm at peace."

"Donovan, everyone ever healed in the Bible ended up dying of something. The healing isn't what we need. We need God."

Alfred gave me something that I must have missed in seminary. He gave me something that I had overlooked in the Book of Order. God can show up in the human. What a power we have!

My friend, Dr. Daniel Patte, will have his memorial service here at the end of October. Daniel was a New Testament professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School. It's always nice to have one of those sitting under your pulpit every time you preach on a Sunday morning. But I quickly learned that Daniel wasn't the critic in the third pew. He was more a father figure, and a friend. A friend who helped me hear the Word of God.

I would go to visit him at their home and Aline would make me a blueberry torte, and Daniel would make an espresso. We would talk about the text.

And Daniel would say, "It's good to have the Word of God speak to the soul, to the human condition. We all need to have that in our hearts." He said, "We need to think about what the text calls us to do. We should be called by the Spirit into mission and ministry." We do a lot of that at Westminster. It sends us forward, it sends us out to live out the Word, and that's important.

But, then he said, "You need to see how the text plays into the apocalyptic vision of God." "Excuse me, what?"

The "apocalyptic vision of God." The power of God is at work! Don't forget that! The holy, holy, holy! Power of God that is reconciling all things. That Word of God that there's nothing that can separate us from the love of God. That the Spirit of God is at work in this world. You don't just have the dream, you live the dream.

You must live into the dream that “Every valley shall be lifted, and every mountain made low! The rough places made smooth, and the crooked places made straight.” Only God can do that!

Now, you may call believing in that crazy, but I like that kind of crazy. Because it’s crazy in a world where your second home in Florida has been washed away for the third time. That may be crazy in a nation where \$8.6 billion has been spent on advertising for politics so far this year. \$8.6 billion for a negative word!

Oh, it may be crazy to think that God is up to something in a world hell-bent on destroying everybody. Kill your enemy!

It may be crazy, but I’m into the craziness of God.

“Who though God, became human, taking on the form of a servant to see you. To see us all eye to eye, to know our condition and to lift us up to become children of God. Holy, holy, holy.

Once upon a time, there was a man named Elijah. And during the drought, he went up to a mountain to pray for rain. After praying, he said to his servant, “Go out and see if there’s any rain coming.” The servant went out to check and came back, “No. More of the same. It’s sunny, hot and dry.” Elijah went back to praying.

“Would you mind checking again to see if my prayers have done any good?” And the servant went out, looked around, came back and said, “Nothing! Hot, hot, and more hot.” And Elijah kept praying. “I know I’ve asked you before, but would you mind...”

And the servant came back and said, “Nothing. Except there is one cloud about the size of a human hand.”

A cloud about the size of a human hand: that’s nothing. A human hand cloud is nothing in the great blue of the sky!

Oh, I need God. And I need you because in knowing you, I see Jesus, and in seeing Jesus, I have God.

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