

Unrelenting Grace: A United Methodist Way of Life – Grace and the Healing of Our  
Bodies (Churches)

11/19/2023

Scriptures: John 5:1-15; James 5:13-20

### **Healing A Paralyzed Man**

Some interesting questions stand out after reading and listening to the Gospel lesson this morning. When Jesus asked the man who had been paralyzed for 38 years if he wanted to get well, why didn't the man respond with a resounding, "Yes, I do!"? When he's cured, there's no record of the man thanking Jesus for working this miracle. Wouldn't you think, if one were in a position like that for 38 years, and suddenly they were completely healed, they would show some display of gratitude, or at least an attitude of thanksgiving?

Yet Jesus finds him later, and tells the guy "Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you," (John 5:14). Forgiveness from sin is the most basic need of the human heart. Without forgiveness, we're lost. Only Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is able to provide the kind of forgiveness we need – through His own blood shed on the cross.

Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. This most ancient statement of faith of the redemptive work which Jesus has done, which we recite in unison each time we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion, is the foundation of our faith. His sacrificial death, His resurrection, and His imminent return should be something we contemplate on each day of our lives as Christians. Yet so often we get side-tracked and even derailed from focusing on Jesus, and then it's only when we find ourselves in crisis that we recenter ourselves on the One in whom we should always be rooted.

Today's epistolary lesson, from James, talks about healing. While it's primarily about the healing of us as individuals, it may do well to also view it through the lens of God's gift of healing to the Church, generally speaking, to the United Methodist Church, and to us here at New Hope specifically. I know you're hurting – you've been grieving – I've been mourning the loss of friendships, relationships, and connections during this year as well. We need healing and wholeness – and we see in the Scriptures, healing comes from God. God isn't done with us yet. He still has great plans for us here, plans for the United Methodist Church, and plans for the Church, generally speaking, all over the world, working in unity to make Christ known to those who still need to meet Him. If you have your Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to James 5:13-20. **Read James 5:13-20.**

### **James the Brother of Jesus**

Bible scholars believe that the author of the book of James was the oldest sibling of Jesus. This oldest son of Joseph and Mary led the Church at Jerusalem, and was

martyred around 60 AD. In one of the Gospels, he shows up with Mary while Jesus is in a house healing and teaching people, and tries to get Jesus out of there because some in the family thought Jesus had lost His mind (Mark 3:20-35). Having a relationship with Jesus does some amazing stuff to people. They go from disbelief and maybe outright hostility, to being dedicated followers, even to the point of being willing to die for their faith.

James writes, “Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord,” (5:13-15). We’ve talked before about Paul telling the ancient church to “pray without ceasing.” Here’s another ancient church father telling us the same thing. Pray when we have trouble. Sing praise songs when we’re happy. Maybe you haven’t thought of this before, but when we sing – we put our hearts into it – we’re lifting our voices up to God. It’s worship and adoration – it’s a type of prayer.

James says to call the elders of the church to pray over and anoint the sick. I want us to be clear here, because we have a tendency to get hung up on semantics. James is saying when we’re sick, we ask the people in the congregation who we know are dialed into a daily walk with Jesus to pray over us. It may be the pastor, but certainly other people, too. I say this because, in the United Methodist Church, the term “elder” is used as an order of clergy. We have people who are ordained to a lifetime of service in the Church who are “elders.”

We also have deacons in the United Methodist Church – which is the other order of ordained clergy. And then there are lay people, licensed local pastors, who take on-going courses and are licensed to perform the duties of clergy in a specific location for a time. There’s a brief lesson for today on our United Methodist polity! The elder James is referring to has to do with the local church structure – getting lifelong members together to pray and anoint the sick – not a denominational structure.

### **Praying for the Sick**

We’ve done this before, usually towards the end of worship service, and more recently Janice and I did this when Benjy was at Lima hospital a couple months ago. We’ll close our worship time this morning with an anointing service, so if you’ve got needs, specifically health concerns – whether that’s a need for physical, emotional, spiritual healing, or something else – get yourself ready. In a few minutes, we’re going to open things up and take time to pray over all of it. We’re given many great promises in the Scriptures.

James told the church at Jerusalem – and he tells New Hope Church, and the Church in general today – this: “The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven,” (5:15).

Bishop Carter, in his book, writes, “The ultimate healing is in the resurrection... Many of us prayed for the healing of loved ones who are no longer with us in the body. We believe that the ultimate healing is in the resurrection... Not everything that is broken in this life will be made whole in this life. The ultimate healing is in the resurrection.”<sup>1</sup> Three times in a single paragraph, the bishop of the Western North Carolina Conference identifies the resurrection as the ultimate healing.

That’s powerful stuff. Only Jesus does that. He’s the only One who has ever died and rose again. Notice though, that James points out how we are to do it: “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective,” (5:16). I know the idea of confessing our sins to each other is off-putting to a lot of people, especially Protestant Christians.

### **Confessing Our Sins**

The thing we have to understand, though, is that in the ancient church, everything was held in common. We read that two weeks ago. The early Christians knew pretty much everything going on in each others’ lives. There’s an account in Acts where a couple sold a field, and gave part of the money from the sale to the church, but claimed they had given the whole amount – and God struck them dead for lying. Check out the end of Acts 4, and all of Acts 5 later today to read about it. God wasn’t mad about them selling the field, or even keeping part of the money – what was upsetting was that they were lying about it. That’s what got them into trouble.

The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches continue this type of practice even today. For the saints who are dialed into their local church, the parish priests know everything going on in their lives. The people tell them what they’re struggling with. Most of us are old enough to remember seeing *Father Dowling Mysteries* on television. In that series, the mystery often revolved around someone in the Confessional Booth pouring their hearts out to Father Dowling, and taking off in a hurry because they had some other crime to commit, or by someone calling on the telephone to tell Father Dowling something illegal was about to go down. Christians in the Roman Catholic Church view the act of confession as a sacrament of the Church.

There may be some value in vocalizing those sins which we know we’ve committed to another brother or sister who’s strong in the faith so that we can get the burden of it off our chests. They can become a prayer partner with us, and for us, and help build us up to withstand temptation. Prayer is a powerful action, especially when we’re dialed into Jesus and pray for things that align with what He wants. James writes, “Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops,” (5:17-18).

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Carter, Jr. *Unrelenting Grace: A United Methodist Way of Life*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2023), pages 69-70.

By confessing our sins to each other, and praying with and for each other, we become authentic Christians. We are called to do the things which Christ does in the Scriptures: to love God, and neighbor – even when we don't like what they do. In the words of Henri Nouwen, "When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers... Jesus is God's wounded healer: through His wounds we are healed."<sup>2</sup> This is something that we need to be, as a local church, but also as a denomination. We need healing – and the only way to receive it, is to admit that we're flawed, imperfect, and in need of it. And then let God use us, as He will, without any conditions, stipulations, or limits placed on what we're willing to do in answer to His will for us.

## **Salvation Requires Change**

Sometimes our actions don't match our words. We don't always practice what we preach. That's the hang-up the world has with Christians. We have a tendency to be hypocrites. We have to overcome our hang-ups, our judgmental nature focused on other people who we view as "sinners," and less than us, and be willing to serve, as Jesus did.

Bishop Carter writes, "We have not always done well at recognizing our foul spirits, and this, in part, is why the church does not generally have great authority in our culture... The church finds itself in a culture of foul spirits, and sometimes the church itself is fully immersed in that culture."<sup>3</sup> It sounds pretty grim. In one of the epistles, Paul writes, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will," (Rom. 12:2).

That's what it takes. Salvation requires us to change – to be transformed – into better image-bearers of the One who loves us most. James puts it this way: "My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins," (5:19-20).

## **Are We Yet Alive?**

In 1749, Charles Wesley, John Wesley's brother, wrote a hymn which has been sang at nearly every Annual Conference since. *And Are We Yet Alive*, starts with a question: "And are we yet alive, and see each other's face? Glory and thanks to Jesus give for His almighty grace!" Later, it makes a statement, which really speaks to the time in which we find ourselves. It says, "What troubles have we seen, what mighty conflicts past, fightings without, and fears within, since we assembled last!" The last

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<sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*, (New York: Crown Publishing, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Carter, *Unrelenting Grace*, pages 74-75.

stanza provides great hope to all God's people: "Let us take up the cross till we the crown obtain, and gladly reckon all things loss so we may Jesus gain."<sup>4</sup>

Next Sunday, Reign of Christ, or Christ the King Sunday, marks the end of the liturgical year in the life of the Church. Advent, on the first week of December marks the beginning of the new year. As we wind down from this year, and prepare to move into the next, I wonder how will we pattern ourselves after Jesus, to make a more hospitable world, beginning within our own hearts? How will we radically reintegrate people in our community who have been separated, but who will return to our fellowship? As a local church, who do we want to be?

As we move into the Advent and Christmas season, I hope we pattern our hospitality on that of Christ – who ate with sinners, crossed ethnic boundaries, and touched the unclean. I hope we'll truly live lives now that are not our own – that we'll represent Jesus, and the unconditional love of God. I hope we'll walk together in ministry. We call that connection. "The connection has a purpose, to help us grow spiritually and to love our neighbor. This is the practical heart of Methodism."<sup>5</sup> And I hope we'll worship constantly. I hope we'll immerse ourselves in the scriptures and pray them.

If we welcome unconditionally, walk in unity together, and worship God constantly, then we will be in great shape as followers of Jesus Christ. We will be useful beacons of light, drawing strangers closer to Him, so that they become our brothers and sisters through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit at work within their hearts. If we are willing – if the United Methodist Church is willing – God will use us to draw others to Himself. He will heal us, and He will use us as wounded healers for others. "Our happiness and holiness are based in our neighbor's well-being, that is, being surrounded by more neighbors than strangers... It takes courage to see the stranger who is near us as a neighbor we are called to love."<sup>6</sup>

**Prayer:** Almighty God, to You all hearts are opened, all desires known, and from You no secrets are hidden. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love You, and worthily magnify Your holy name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Wesley (1749), in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, (Nashville, United Methodist Publishing, 1989), 553.

<sup>5</sup> Carter, *Unrelenting Grace*, 81.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 83-84.