



A DAY OF HEALING

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, November 9, 2008

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Lection – James 5:13-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 13) Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. (v. 14) 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. (v. 15) The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and

anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. (v. 16) 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.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment:

A Day of Healing reflects a Christian tradition that can be partly traced to an imperial decree inaugurated by the Roman emperor Constantine in 321 A.D. In an attempt to connect the Jewish Sabbath tradition with third-century interpretations of “a day of rest,” Constantine re-introduced Sunday—the Lord’s Day—and other observances to enforce Constantinian Christian ideas of Sabbath rest and healing.

By the late-medieval period, the observance of special days for healing was acknowledged for Sunday worship and during other services. Through imperial expansion and contact with various indigenous populations in Africa, the Caribbean, and Australia, in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, healing services within the Protestant tradition began to take on the form of an amalgamation of indigenous cultic practices and more charismatic movements inspired by events such as the First Great Awakening.

The twenty-first century African American church, as well as the Anglican Church in Canada and Australia, now incorporate *A Day of Healing* into their liturgical calendar. Prayer, the laying on of hands, songs, silent meditation and scripture readings are common ingredients used by these churches to signify that a special day has been set aside for the powerful, divine intervention of healing of a host of maladies.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: James 5:13-16

Part One: The Post-Colonial Contexts of the Interpreter

As I reflect on James 5:13-16, I cannot help but acknowledge the heart-wrenching effects social and political oppression in America have made upon the African American soul. Devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, political disenfranchisement, disparities in health-care and unemployment all work to weaken and rupture the spirit of African Americans. America’s social malice, as it is often called, provokes cognitive and physiological responses in African American bodies, an invisible deep-rooted sickness that works towards the total demise of African Americans. These responses—biochemical disorders, elevated heart rates, diabetes, depression and hypertension—not only corrupt the physiological and soteriological system of African Americans, but work towards the destruction of so many people. Understanding the connection between socio-political oppression and varying physiological disorders should also remind us of the great need for healing prayer.

When commonly accepted resources for healing are lacking, African Americans have long understood and followed the instructions of James 5:13-16 to preserve their souls, psyches and their bodies. Those at the bottom understand better than most that there is a

power in the universe bigger than themselves and that it is this power that is to be called upon as a constant companion and especially when healing is needed.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Many biblical scholars will argue that James, the Lord's brother (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:18-25; Gal. 1:19), is the author of this epistle, locating the placement and date of the writing at Jerusalem 45-65 A.D. Other scholars suggest that the author of this epistle was an anonymous Christian writer and place the epistle's date around 75-95 A.D. The author of the book of James was actually named Jacob, but English translators of the New Testament reserved the name Jacob for the Hebrew patriarch and translated all other persons named Jacob in the New Testament as James.¹

The power of prayer and its appropriateness in every life situation constitutes the major theological theme in James 5:13-16. For James, the ministry of intercessory prayer offers the Christian community the best medium by which it can engage in a dedicated struggle against sin and imperialism. Through the power of prayer, total personal and communal healing can occur. James was following the example of Jesus who taught his disciples to pray and showed them that people can be healed through prayer.

In verse 13, the first question being raised by James relates to the presence of daily *suffering* (cf. v. 10). In the more general sense, the term *suffering* is being used by James to measure the integrity of one's endurance in the midst of daily hardship. James understands that one's endurance can dwindle when he or she is exposed to daily persecution. Being Jewish and Christian under Roman imperial rule put one's life at stake daily. James is also concerned with the emotional discouragement persons may be feeling as a result of living under imperial rule since the next question James asks, "*Are any cheerful?*", focuses clearly on one's mood and state of mind. In either case, James acknowledges the presence of *suffering* within the daily Christian life in first century Jerusalem. However, he still calls the congregation to prayer and praise; he wants them to focus on tapping into the transcendent power that sustains one in the midst of social disorder and oppression.

In verse 14, James continues to tell us what havoc daily oppression can generate. It can paralyze one's ability to pray. For James, if one is found to be *sick* among you, the church should be called by its leaders to prayer. More specifically, *the elders of the church* should be summoned for the ministry of intercession. In using the term *elders*, James is probably referring to the eldest and most respected Christians in the fellowship (cf. Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:4; 1 Tim. 5:1, 17, 19.) In the first century, Judaic custom demanded that the village elders be summoned to visit the dangerously sick and pray with them. If such a person was unable to pray, the *elders* would pray on this person's behalf while the person prayed in their heart.

The call for *anointing them with oil* was also a first century custom (cf. Mark 6:13; 16:18; Luke 10:34). James is referring to the symbolic use of oil and the laying on of hands as a rite of healing. By *anoint*—to lay on hands with oil—James is referring to the ritualistic act

in which the sick are pointed towards Christ's healing power and presence in the midst of acute suffering. James is not focused on the ritual as much as he is focused on teaching the oppressed community that their own prayers can heal the sick. The anointing of oil, then, is an act of adoption by which the church absorbs the suffering of the *sick* and reciprocates the love of Christ through a compassionate touch. Regardless of one's *suffering*, God can heal the *sick* through the touch of a mature *elder* in the church.

For James, the church must remember that faithful prayer works. Even in the midst of struggle, faithful prayer is effective. The statement in v. 15—*the prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise them up* is important in that while some illnesses were believed to be the result of personal sin, other illnesses were believed to be the result of uncontrollable external forces which sinfully pressed against the oppressed body of the poor and the persecuted. James makes clear to the church that the Lord has the power to resist all external and internal forces, healing the *sick* when believers pray.

James logically uses the term *therefore* as a lead-in to his conclusion. The *therefore* in verse 16 refers to the efficacy of prayer in any situation mentioned in verses 13-15. Regardless of the depravity sin causes in the human soul, prayer can lift the burden of physical, psychological or spiritual disorders. Christians, then, should hasten to *confess* their sins to one another. Even those under persecution must be careful to repent lest they fall into temptation. For James, the idea is not to point out one's personal flaws, but to highlight the common frailties that we all have that can be healed through confession. Confession serves as the preparation for prayer and healing. The voice of James echoes through the halls of history: "Church, believe again in the power of healing prayer by those among you." Given the illnesses rampant within our community, we need fewer business meetings and more prayer meetings, fewer conferences, and more prayer meetings. Less of so much is needed in the church and the world, but just the opposite can be said of healing prayer!

Celebration

Not only are the prayers of the righteous powerful, James reminds us that the prayers of the righteous are effective. Prayer still changes things and it changes people. Praise God that when we have reached our wit's end and doctors have left the room, we can use what our foreparents called "the telephone in our bosom" and call up the Great Physician. And if we are unable to pray, thanks be to God for those prayer warriors, the elder saints, who can get through to heaven, who will surround us and petition God on our behalf.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The calm singing of hymns and chants in a quiet restful area (v.13); the cries and moans of the sickly (v. 13); the quietness of the elders while they apply oil to the body (v. 14); the gasps of onlookers as the sick rise from their beds of affliction (v. 14);

Sights: Flames flickering at the altar during a night-time service (v. 14); a sick disheveled body curled up on the corner of a bed (v. 14); and

Smells: The fragrance of oil or myrrh (v. 13-14).

III. Additional Material for the Sermonic Moment

What happens when you pray? The Holy Spirit knows what God has in the garage. It is already there. The Holy Spirit's task is to get you to want it—to get you to ask for it.

-- Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King²

During Jesus' ministry, God was viewed as the source of health but also as One who could use sickness and suffering for spiritual growth. Jesus cured people of all kinds of diseases, even death itself, sometimes by touching the person and sometimes simply by speaking a word.

--Abigail Rian Evans³

About five years ago we were at a national convention, and they sent word to Mother Boyd that her son had died in Atlanta. As we were making arrangements to go, and get her ready to go to Atlanta to claim the body of her son, she sent word down there by one of our bishops and said, "Tell them don't touch him until I get down there." And so we immediately tried to find the next flight for her to get down there and she said, "Nah, y'all, I've got a seminar to do." She said, "Let me do my little seminar, and then I'll jump on a plane." She got on the plane and went down to Atlanta and went into the morgue, and saw they were ready to do the autopsy. And she told the attendant, "You step out a moment." He stepped out of the room, and she had two other prayer warriors—two other mothers of the church—with her. They went into the morgue, pulled the sheet back, and she said to God, "Now, God, you made my boy and I know he's not through living the will of God, so Satan, I rebuke you in the name of Jesus. Son, "I'm speaking life back into your body!" She said she waited about five minutes and nothing happened, and then she turned to God and said, "God, if my life means anything to you, then I want you to bring my son back to life." Because God valued her life, her son came back to life and he is living today. Is that not what Christ did on Calvary? On Calvary Christ essentially said, "God if my life means anything to you then bring humanity back to life."

--Carolyn Showell.⁴

Notes

1. Blackman, E. C. The Epistle of James. London: SCM Press, 1957.
2. Blackaby, Henry T. and Claude V. King. Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994. p.176.

3. Evans, Abigail Rian. The Healing Church: Practical Programs for Health Ministries. Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1999.
4. Showell, Carolyn. "Greater Is He." The African American Pulpit (Fall 2005): p. 83.