

September 27, 2015
The Rev. Carenda Baker
17th Sunday after Pentecost (Yr. B)
James 5:13-20

When I read the address Pope Francis delivered earlier this week to the United States Congress, I was especially struck by two things that were woven throughout his entire address. The first was the Pope's repeated emphasis on the need to work for the common good of all people. And he gave wonderful examples of four Americans who did just that: Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement, and Thomas Merton, a Roman Catholic monk who wedded contemplative prayer with the action of respectful dialogue about social issues of his time. The second thing which struck me was the Pope's statement that we need to implement strategies to create a "culture of care" in order to combat poverty and to restore the dignity of the excluded. Those two phrases - "for the common good" and "culture of care" caught and held my attention and left me wondering - what would help to create a more recognizable "culture of care" in our nation? In Chambersburg? In our homes?

Well this is actually what today's epistle lesson from James describes: how to create and maintain a "*culture of care*" in a congregation of the faithful for "*the common good*" of the local body of Christ. James' very practical instruction functions like a brief "how to manual" to help a church grow in wisdom and spiritual maturity. It seems James was a wise and skilled pastor who knew that when Christian believers gather in churches, trouble, illness, and sin are going to show up sooner or later. There should be no surprise in this fact, because suffering, illness and sin are just normal parts of our human condition. According to church traditions, James carried the nickname "Old Camel Knees" because of thick calluses built up on his knees from many years of determined prayer! That deep commitment to a life of active prayer must have been the foundation from which he could share the wisdom in this letter he wrote to churches of his day, and left to us for our instruction.

God has gifted us with holy and powerful practices to be used in caring for each other in order to maintain health and vitality as a body of the faithful. When these practices are used, the health, vitality, and witness to Christ are strengthened in the life of the whole congregation, and the light and love of Christ shine more brightly through us. There are four practices James mentions in today's epistle reading that I invite us to look at carefully. As we do so, I suggest that we ponder and answer two questions for ourselves: 1. How do these practices describe me and this Trinity congregation? 2. How do these practices challenge me to deepen my relationship with God and to deepen my faithfulness in loving others?

1. *"Are any among you suffering? They should pray."* The 1st holy practice James points to in this passage is prayer. And because it is directed to the life of the congregation it implies INTERCESSORY PRAYER. We offer intercessory prayer every Sunday when we share together in the Prayers of the People. This is actually one of my favorite parts of the service. In lifting up the cares and concerns of this congregation, our community, and world, we strengthen the bond of love we share in Christ. The desire to pray for others comes from God's heart of compassion. Praying for others requires a willingness to let our own hearts be touched and changed by sharing the vulnerability, pain, and burdens of others. Interceding in prayer for others can deepen our level of spiritual maturity. It can motivate us to look at ourselves to see what evidence there is of those fruit of the Spirit: love, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness. Praying for others helps us learn to persevere and to remain faithful, whether or not we see evidence of any change in those persons and situations for which we pray. Our prayers of intercession show that we are dependent on God and that we recognize we all need God's help and mercy. And when we pray for the needs of others, we join in continuing the ongoing redeeming work of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection. Intercessory prayer, like all prayer, changes us.
2. *"Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise."* The 2nd holy practice is PRAISE. Praise is like taking a dose of vitamins for the spirit. Joy and gratitude

to God are meant to be shared. They provide encouragement and are spirit lifters. Praise is an antidote for discouragement, despair, and hopelessness. Praise often springs from thanksgiving – for petitions and intercessory prayers answered, for guidance and direction received, for the simple recognition that God is utterly faithful, and marvelously and madly in love with us! Praise comes from knowing that God is the source of all goodness. Praise flows when we know who and whose we are – beloved children of God. Praise is a practice that helps us stay focused on giving God, rather than our own egos, first place in our lives.

3. *“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.”* Anointing with oil and laying on of hands are integral parts of the 3rd holy practice of exercising the ministry of HEALING. Sickness is not limited to just physical illness. Mental and emotional illnesses are equally impacted by the practice of healing ministry through prayer, anointing with oil, and laying on of hands. The active practice of calling on God for healing is grounded in the belief that it is God’s deep desire to heal, and that healing comes because God truly does have the power to heal. Our efforts to work with God through healing practices says that love, compassion, healing grace, and divine power are today conveyed through human touch, by human vessels, just as practiced by Jesus and the first disciples. One third of Jesus’ ministry involved healing. He gave us the power to manifest healing in his name. The practice of engaging God’s healing grace rests in the fact that God is good and wants absolutely the best for us. The bold and confident practice of healing ministry offered in Christ’s name says that God’s desire for every part of creation is restoration and wholeness. Being specific in our requests for healing shows our faith and trust in God’s ability to deliver healing, in whatever form will most fully bring restoration and wholeness to the individual or group in need.

4. “ . . . 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 4th practice - CONFESSION helps to bring spiritual healing. In confession, we acknowledge to ourselves, to each other, and to God that we mess up, over and over again. We fall short of what God desires for us. By things done and left undone, we hurt ourselves. We hurt others. We hurt God. There is need for forgiveness and reconciliation. So, we do pray a communal prayer of general confession when we offer Morning Prayer and in most celebrations of the Eucharist. And we do receive absolution, forgiveness of sins, and the promise of the Holy Spirit’s continuing work in us.

Somehow I think James had more than a corporate prayer of confession in mind when he wrote to the churches of his day. Especially in the context of a small congregation, I’m guessing there were times when people offended one another, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Earlier on in this teaching letter James talks about needing to tame the tongue, calling it a fire, capable of both blessing and cursing. We know what he is getting at when he mentions the power of the tongue. Mean words spoken directly. A curt response. Gossiping about someone. Verbal put-downs. I know people can and do apologize to each other for such hurts inflicted, but it’s not always easy or comfortable to admit it when we do things that hurt others. Dr. Julia Gatta, my pastoral theology professor at Sewanee would say, “The goal of Christian practice is not personal comfort but transformation.” It is so important to care for our relationships, especially with others in the body of Christ, and those with whom we are most intimate. When relationships are hurt and fractured, there is need for confession of whatever we did or neglected to do that contributed to the brokenness and separation. Sometimes we are able to confess directly to the person whom we have hurt, and that is what James instructs us to do. But sometimes it is so difficult and we need the assistance of a spiritual director or confessor, someone to whom we confide our sin and who can help us find our way to forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration.

If you have never looked at the rite for the Reconciliation of a Penitent in the Book of Common Prayer, I would encourage you to spend some time reading and reflecting on it. Confession and reconciliation are not just Lenten fare, which is the one time of the year we routinely hear about confession as a means of grace. In the Episcopal Church the general understanding about the practice of individual private confession is that “all may, none must, some should.” When we choose to make an individual private confession as a penitent to a priest, it signals our desire for, and willing participation with the Holy Spirit in being transformed through Christ. It allows conversion to reach us at a deeper level. It offers a real and immediate opportunity to experience the intimate, rich amazing healing grace of God. There are just times in life when we need to ask ourselves, “How much more of God’s grace do I want, do I need to experience?”

I can tell you firsthand that engaging in this rite is incredibly freeing and healing. It offers the direct experience of forgiveness of our personal specific sins, not just the head knowledge of being forgiven. I engaged in the Rite of Reconciliation of a Penitent for the first time in March of this year, during Holy Week. I firmly believe that because I will someday be asked to be present and listen to someone’s confession, to offer absolution, and help guide him or her back to God’s forgiveness and healing love, then I need to be practicing it myself. And it was very important for me to experience it before being ordained as a priest. The first experience of engaging in the rite of reconciliation, if not prompted by a spiritual crisis, usually involves a full-life review. So for me it meant reviewing fifty-five years’ worth of sins! It was rather daunting to write down all the things I believed I needed to confess – things done, left undone, patterns of behavior in thought, word, and deed. And I didn’t write them down all in one sitting. I was honestly and painfully specific. I cried a lot at the list of things that grieved my heart and God’s heart.

And it was an experience of deep healing and spiritual restoration and renewal, followed immediately by an inflowing of fresh energy and joy.

A week or so later when I was at Morning Prayer with a small group at St. Andrew's, Shippensburg, I had an "aha" moment when we came to the final portion of the Apostles Creed saying: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS . . ." It may sound odd, but I realized I could truly and fully affirm I DO believe in the forgiveness of sins, because I had experienced it in such a real and tangible way during the rite of Reconciliation. It's such a grace-filled moment when head and heart are in complete agreement about an important life-giving and life-changing truth.

So – how is Trinity doing as a community in living out a "culture of care" for each other, for our common good as a congregation of our Lord Christ? Interceding. Praising. Actively participating and aiding in God's desire to heal each of us, and all of us. Confessing our sins, which leads to forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life. These practices are vital for our life together and will stretch us. Challenge us. Renew and transform us. Gracious and holy God, make it so – for our health in body, mind, heart, and spirit, and for the sake of this precious and hurting world you made and so deeply love. Amen.

