

Confessional Service
Lutheran Theological Seminary, Tshwane, SA
Wednesday in Trinity XII
26 August 2015

Psalm: Ps. 50:1-15

Hymn: "To God the Holy Spirit Let us Pray"-768 LSB

James 5:13-18

Merciful Father, bless the preaching and hearing of our your Word that we might trust in the righteousness won for us by the obedient life, holy passion, and victorious resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ and in that confidence have boldness to call upon you in every trouble, confess our sins, and receive your forgiveness; we ask it through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sunday after Sunday, we pray in the Prayer of the Church for those who are sick and suffering. This is good and right because our Father in heaven has commanded us to pray in this way and He has promised to hear us. But as James tells us, our praying is not to be confined to those times of distress when we are most acutely aware of our neediness. We also praise God in our prayers in times of cheerfulness when we are most apt to forget that God is the Giver of every good and perfect gift.

In our text for today, James is especially focusing on the power and place of prayer as it relates to sin and sickness. Already in the opening verse he says "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray." The sick are told to call the elders, that is, the pastors of the church to their sickbed and let them pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. This passage has been sorely abused in the history of the church. The Roman Catholic Church would wrongly come to see this as a proof text for extreme unction, the sacramental anointing of the dying. In North America, there are TV evangelists who advertise holy oil which their watchers may order with the instructions that they are to anoint their money with the oil and then send it to the evangelist with the promise that his anointed money will result in prosperity and health. What was the anointing for in the Book of James? It may have been used to signify the blessing of the Holy Spirit invoked on the sick person. It may have simply been a medical practice to soothe the person who was suffering. In either case, the accent is not on the power of the oil but of prayer.

It is not the anointing which will save, but the prayer of faith. The prayer of the righteous person has great power, says James. Recall the example of Elijah who prayed that it might not rain for three and one-half years and it did not rain. Again he prayed that the parched earth might be soaked and once again bear fruit and so it did.

Prayer is not a means to manipulate God as though if we came up with right combination of words and actions, God would be obligated to give us health, wealth, or whatever else it is that we desire. The power of prayer is the power of God's Word of promise. You see it is not our own desperation alone that drives us to prayer, but God's command and promise. Without the Lord's command, our praying would be on more ill-fated attempt to have God on our own terms. Without His promise to hear our prayers made sure in the blood and righteousness of His Son, our praying would be futile. But God has both commanded us to pray and has promised to hear us. This is the prayer of faith which will save the sick even if the prayer is answered ultimately only in the resurrection of the body to life in new creation- the home of righteousness- where sin, sickness, and death will be no more. James says that this prayer is

answered in the fact that “The Lord will raise him up.” Sometimes, God in His mercy raises up a person from critical illness in this life. They are returned to health. For that we give thanks. Lazarus was raised up from his grave by Jesus after a fatal illness; but a day would come when Lazarus would again die and his body would be interred in the tomb again where it will rest to the Last Day. But there is an ultimate healing that is coming when all those who call on the name of the crucified and risen Lord will be raised up in free from every diseased organ, every deformed or crippled limb, every non-functioning eye or ear, every broken and worn out body. Faith lays hold of this promise even though all we now see is death and decay.

In the midst of his discourse on prayer, James interjects a call to the confession of sins: “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed.” Surprising shift? Not really, for after all, we confess at the end of the Apostles’ Creed” “I believe in...the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” Or in the words of the Catechism, “where there is forgiveness of sins there is also life and salvation.”

That brings us to why we are here in the Chapel of St. Timothy this morning. We are here to confess our sins and receive Christ’s absolution. Some of you come with bodies assaulted by persistent pain. Others come struggling with a chronic disease. We all come with sin and for that deadly disease, there is no cure in us. It is only the word of Jesus, who carried in His own body your infirmities so that by His stripes you are healed, that you have relief. To those who confess their sins trusting in His mercy, He promises forgiveness in His blood. There is a word here today which will enliven your prayers, a word which will give to you –whoever you are and whatever burdens you are carrying in body and soul- relief. It is the word of absolution: “Your sins are forgiven you.” That is a word that will raise you up to live in Christ now by faith and on the Last Day to live with Him in body and soul forever.

Amen