

Occasion: Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Text: James 5: (1-12) 13-20

Date: September 30th, 2018

Hold onto Prayer

A truck driver happened to glance out the window of his cab one afternoon and, to his amazement, saw a three-legged chicken trotting alongside. The trucker, unable to believe his eyes, stepped on the accelerator. Lo and behold! The chicken kept pace -- at 70 km/h.

The driver, sure he must be hallucinating, tromped down on the pedal still harder. As the semi barreled along at 80 km/h and then 100 km/h, the trucker rubbed his eyes in astonishment. The three-legged chicken passed him and kept going, disappearing down the highway. Seeing a truck stop ahead, the driver slowed his rig and pulled over. Some local farmers were there. He told them about the three-legged chicken, and one of the farmers said, "**I believe you. In fact, I raise 'em!**"

The trucker was amazed. "**How ... and why?**"

"Well, I have three children," explained the farmer, "and they all fight over the drumsticks. So, I bred my flock until I got chickens with three legs."

"Oh. How do the taste?" asked the trucker.

"I don't know. I haven't caught one yet."

I think a lot of us today are like that farmer with a yard full of 3 legged chickens when it comes to praying. The farmer's yard was full of promises of delicious chicken drumsticks for his family, but he couldn't grab a hold of a chicken. We love to hear the promises in the Scriptures that go with the encouragement to pray and perhaps have read a few modern day stories of people praying and what happens in their lives. And we say: **WOW!**

We like the idea of praying, many of us have attended Bible studies about prayer, read books about prayer, attended workshops on praying and even started out with a good deal of enthusiasm on a regular prayer routine, but like the farmer, we've done a lot of chasing around but have never tasted prayer as something real and meaningful. It always seems to

run away from us. When chickens are being chased they run and hide. So it is with our prayer-life. It hides itself among everything else that's going on in our lives or is overwhelmed with the events in our lives. It seems that everyone else can pray and get results, and people in the Bible can do it, but as far as we are concerned, results from prayer are as scarce as hen's teeth.

Our reasoning might go like this, **“Me, I pray for God to fix my back, I hate being in pain and don't like it one bit, so I pray and every night after I have eased myself into bed I ask God to bring healing ... but in the morning when I get on my feet it's still there. It's all right for James to say that “the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up” but I feel a bit like the farmer who has the promise of a wonderful three-legged chicken dinner for his family right in front of him and sees it running before his very eyes within an arm's reach but he just can't catch the darned things”.**

It seems the apostle Paul had a similar problem. He was someone who prayed again and again for other people but on one occasion he

prayed for something that was bothering him personally. He called it **“a thorn in my flesh”** – it might have been something like a physical and health issue or even a relationship matter – whatever it was it really bothered Paul and he prayed about it. He wanted it fixed. Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed three times which to us doesn’t sound like he put too much effort into his prayer, but to the people of the time that indicated serious and earnest prayer. James says, **“The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick.”** (v.15); Jesus said, **“Ask and you will receive”** (Luke 11:9); and in another place James says, **“You don’t have what you want because you don’t ask God for it”** (James 4:2).

So what went wrong for Paul who still had to live with his **“thorn in the flesh”**? Or did anything go wrong at all. I would say that there isn’t a person here who is still waiting for a prayer to be answered or perhaps has even given up on ever having a request to God being answered. To go back to the farmer with the three legged chickens. Just as the farmer can’t get his hands on the tasty drumsticks running around his farmyard, we’ve got this wonderful gift of prayer within an arm’s reach but can’t quite grab

hold of it, use it and understand God's use of our prayers.

It's quite clear that James believes that prayer is powerful and effective. So let's see if we can grab hold of what James means when he says without any explanation, "**Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray**"(v.13).

When we pray we always start with three presumptions:

1. That **God exists**, and in the present company I'm not going to argue that one any further. 2. That **God wants us to pray** and actually listens to our prayers. We certainly have enough invitations to pray throughout the Scriptures and examples that God hears our prayers. James gave us one in the reading when a man prayed for no rain and a drought followed, and when he prayed for rain, it poured and the land produced good crops. However, if you want me to prove to you right now that God will listen to our prayers this morning in this church, this is something I can't prove but can only believe in faith. 3. That **God actually cares enough** about the little things of this world; that he really wants to be bothered with our personal concerns even though in the whole of the universe they really are

so small. It might seem that my aching back is nothing compared to the tragedy in various places around the world with so many people, including small children, trying to find a safe place to live.

In answer to the question does God care about the little things, **we need to look at Jesus.** He had learned as a boy from the Scriptures that the heavenly Father was the ruler of heaven and earth and the whole universe, and yet he felt the need to flood heaven with his prayers constantly. James especially mentions praying for the sick. Our physical and mental well-being are very important to God. He created us and is very concerned when the corruption of this world invades our bodies and destroys the happiness that He has intended for us. Jesus came to save our bodies; He healed sick bodies, raised bodies from the dead, He promised that our bodies will be raised from the dead, and when we receive Holy Communion - this is healing medicine for both our body and soul. And so it's clear God wants us to pray for healing.

The way God heals our bodies and minds might not always be right now as we might like it to happen. Though we pray earnestly for healing,

a person might become more and more sick. Then we ask questions like, **“When should we start asking God for release for the person from the troubles of this life and the peace that he/she can look forward to in the life to come? When a person has lived a long and fulfilling life, should we keep on asking God to lengthen this person’s life when that person’s quality of life has been severely diminished?”**

It’s clear that sometimes we don’t know what to pray for, we pray what we think is right, we might even pray two prayers that seem contradictory because we don’t know which is the right one to pray. God doesn’t mind if we do that. He knows how hard it is from our perspective to know what is right and so we leave things in his all-seeing, all-wise, totally-loving hands knowing that He will provide the best outcome. It may not be the healing that we want, but remember all healing in this life is temporary and that our bodies will be permanently restored to wholeness and healing when they are raised from the grave. Sometimes God in His wisdom gives us a different answer to what we might expect.

I mentioned Paul earlier. He would have dearly loved God to remove

his **“thorn in the flesh”** in the same way Jesus prayed that He wouldn’t have to endure the pain of the cross, so in a similar way the heavenly Father gave to them the strength, the power, the courage and whatever else was needed to endure all things.

Sometimes we will disagree with God’s answer to our prayers and we will question Him, shout at Him, and wonder whether our prayers went any further than the ceiling. We may find ourselves joining with the psalmist, **“Lord why are you silent. Listen to my prayer.”**

That’s how we feel but our feelings deceive us. Listen to this from Psalm 139; **“O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it. You know everything about me.... You know everything I do. You know what I am going to say even**

before I say it, Lord. You go before me and follow me. ... Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too great for me to understand!

(Psalm 139:1-6) God knows us intimately and he does care about us because he is our heavenly parent. We know that when a child suffers, a parent suffers as well. When we come to him with our anguished requests, our helplessness, our tears of pain whether they are tears from physical pain or tears from a heart that is hurting, our heavenly Father feels that pain. We see that in Jesus as well. We know how his heart went out to the sick, the dying, those trapped in sin. He couldn't turn away from their pleas.

Today James says to us, **“Are any among you in trouble? They should pray”**. The psalmist writes, **“Pray to me in time of trouble. I will rescue you, and you will honour Me” (Psalm 50:15)**. Jesus says, **“Ask and you will receive”**.

I, along with many others, will never be able to fathom the role prayer plays in events like the path that a hurricane or a tornado takes, nor the events that lead to refugee camps and the tension in the Middle East,

or how God answers prayers of opposing political parties, but the strange thing is this – God wants us to pray about these things and I know as we pray for these things we become more aware and more caring about our own world and the people who are calling out for help.

God knows us and our world and our needs. He cares for us. He is our Father in heaven. He has shown us how much He loves us in his Son. We are invited to take to Him in prayer the things that concern us and to trust His love to answer in a way that will make a difference. In Jesus' name. Amen.