

***Reach out and touch someone...***

James 5:13-16

Kirkland Congregational Church United Church of Christ

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September 27, 2009

Pray with me, the familiar words that Jennifer read from Psalm 19: May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

**Ana:** “I feel silly. I do not really want to do this. I do not even think you are real. But Phyllis, tells me I must pray anyway. So, God, I am talking to you...” Some of you have heard this before, about how I sit in my Chicago kitchen praying out loud. Reaching out for the first time to a God I do not know, and am not sure I really want to know! Phyllis, my spiritual guide, has urged me to set aside my pride and ask for help.

**Tod:** Right, Ana's first attempt at prayer, hardly inspiring. What did God think of that? Now, I reckon her parents had prayed with her and taught her the Lord's prayer. But here is her first attempt as an adult. Ana, would you say that was a prayer under duress? Did you feel a real need to pray?

**Ana:** Yup! Prayer under pressure! Alright, Tod, let us pull out the skeleton from your prayer closet...Tell everybody about your first attempt at **public** prayer as a pastor.

**Tod:** Oooh, what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, fair enough. My first attempt at prayer in a public and pastoral setting... It is 1981. I am not yet ordained, but am serving as a chaplain at Billings Hospital in Chicago.

On call one night, an elderly woman, who has been in the cardiac unit for nearly a week, takes a turn for the worse. I notify the patient's family. As the hours pass, the family gathers from across the city. I check in with them regularly as I continue to make my rounds of the hospital. I meet the patient's daughter, her grandchildren who are about my age, and her great grandchildren, all crowded into the waiting room. They take turns sitting beside the unconscious patient.

In the wee hours of the morning, when we are all worn with fatigue, the dreaded news arrives. The matriarch of the family has died. I hurry to the room. Nurses busy themselves with the body, separating all the tubes. The family, huddled in the waiting room, are all crying. The patient's daughter wails with grief. The attending doctor asks ME if the daughter should be sedated. That seems more a medical question than a pastoral one. I sense the daughter's grief; her wailing simply expresses her loss.

I have no idea where the thought comes from, divine intervention and inspiration, I say, “Let us pray.” I take hands with the two people next to me. They grasp hands with those next to them. We form a prayer circle, and I start to pray, “O Lord, our God.....” *long pause...*

**Ana:** Yeah? Tod? Go on...

**Tod:** Well, that is just it. My first public prayer in a pastoral setting, in a moment of crisis, and all I can get out is “O Lord, our God.” Not very original or inspirational, and I just stand there silent, at a loss for words!

**Ana:** That is it?

**Tod:** Yeah, 'fraid so.

**Ana:** And?... What happens?

**Tod:** Fortunately, a family member, one of the granddaughters, picks up the prayer from out of my silence. She speaks the words we need to hear in that moment. That granddaughter delivers wise words of comfort. She reminds us of God's presence even in the face of DEATH, even with the life of their beloved Matriarch extinguished.

**Ana:** What she really reminds you all, is that wise words of prayer come not only from trained ministers, but from any person willing to talk to God.... But what about the wailing daughter? What happens to her?

**Tod:** Her wailing ceases the moment she is in the prayer circle. The words of prayer, even my broken words, seem to bring the presence of God into that circle in a tangible way, and it calms her and soothes her soul.

**Ana:** *Are any among you suffering? They should pray... Are any among you sick? ...call the elders of the church and have them pray over them.*” So writes James to the early Church.

Sometimes I imagine the early church being so much closer to the way Jesus wants believers to be than we are, better at worship, better at prayer. I mean, think of it, ***in time*** the early church **is** closer to Jesus. James writes his letter less than 100 years after Jesus' death. That is close. There has been less time to forget what Jesus taught.

But as I read Paul's letters and James's letter, they remind me that those early Christians are as forgetful and undisciplined as we tend to be. The lessons we need to hear were being told to them, not because they knew what to do and did it, but because

they, like us, need to be reminded. And luckily for us, those reminders, those wise words of guidance, are still available for us today in the scriptures and documents of the early church. How are we to behave? What should we do? James, from whose letter we are reading this morning, does not beat around the bush—probably one reason his is my favourite letter in the New Testament. He wisely reiterates the basics, lest we forget....

James, first and foremost, urges the early church to remember to... pray. It seems that for the early church, as for us, the discipline of regular prayer slips away. The hustle and bustle of life distracts the faithful, then and now, from the practice of prayer, which means we then lose contact with God, which then impacts our thoughts and behavior.

**Tod:** Or, worse, our pride keeps us from prayer. We hear or read mocking comments directed at people who pray, who “talk to God.” People accuse us of believing in fairy tales, or worse of being holy-roller fanatics! They belittle us for using faith and prayer as crutches to get us through life. We are stung by accusations of being weak. We smart from those who say we are unable to find our way through life on our own two feet. So, we grit our teeth. We try to find our way, alone. The ups and downs of life overwhelm us, but we stubbornly, some would say stoically, plow through and suffer in silence.

**Ana:** *Are any among you suffering? They should pray.*

Faith and prayer **are** crutches. Who says we do not limp? Who says we are not broken? Who says we do not need God's support? Through prayer, we connect to God's mercy, grace, and love which transform us. We who are imperfect, who do need support, are set back upon our feet enabled to continue along life's way, wobbling, yes, but supported with our faith and prayers.

Feebly, I make my first attempt at prayer as a young adult. I set aside my pride and my own fear of being crazy, and talk out loud to God. I know I need help, and thank God someone suggested I ask God. For in that moment, everything changes. Through that pinprick of humility, my ego deflates – to a more normal size – and I enter a new reality. It is like my eyes open for the first time, like moving from darkness into light. I begin to trust in something new, trust in God. In the following weeks, months and years, through the discipline of on-going prayer, through my willingness to talk to God, and listen to God, a growing conscious contact with God pervades my being. And I am never the same.

**Tod:** Prayer is weird, weird talking to someone we can neither see nor hear. Yet God transforms us through prayer. Ana and I have spoken of prayer before, but we all forget and need reminders. Prayer works. Through prayer, we become receptive and teachable. In response to our prayer, God sorts out the world around us. Our values are

re-ordered. We see the big picture. Prayer puts God at the centre replacing our self-centredness. Our fears are quelled. Our courage to do right is fortified.

**Ana:** Many faithful people have experienced the transformative power of prayer. And many have left behind prayers that have been particularly helpful to them....Left them behind to be reminders to us, tools for us to use in our prayer discipline. Like the prayer Jesus gave to his disciples to use, what we often call “The Lord's Prayer,” “Our father, who art in heaven...” Because someone helped us remember the prayer, we can more easily remember to use it!

**Tod:** My parents and Sunday School teachers helped me learn prayers by heart. And I have taught them to my children. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil...”

**Ana:** Anyone recognize that prayer? [Psalm 23] What other prayers have you memorized so you can use them at a moments notice?

- Be still and know that I am God.
- God make me an instrument of they peace.
- This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.
- God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change...
- God, I offer myself to thee...

These prayers, which someone helped us remember, get us through the day by reminding us of God's presence and connecting us with God.

Let us remember them and use them, and teach them to others we meet along the way.

**Tod:** *Are any among you suffering? They should pray...*

Pray with me...God, thank you for your presence and for the gift of prayer. Tear down the walls of pride that prevent us from coming to you in prayer. I know my parents loved to hear from me when I was living far away from them, why would it be any different for you wanting to hear from us?

Help us do whatever it takes to open our hearts to you,... in silence, that is pretty easy for most of us, but also in word,... that is harder... that we might share with others, the thoughts on our hearts, the concerns that we have. Remind us, O God, that in conversation with you, others have been transformed. Give us the courage to open ourselves in prayer to your transformative powers-- as scary and challenging as that may seem. Keep us mindful, that you are the source of our lives, and that living in you is love and life itself. We know these things through our friend and brother, Jesus the Christ. Amen.