

“From Prayer to Care”

James 5: 13-20, Mark 9: 38-50

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Once there was a monastery in the woods that had fallen upon hard times. In the past it had been a thriving community that was well known and respected throughout the region, but over the last generation the monks had died one by one and there were no new vocations to replace them. Besides this, the monks did not seem to be as friendly to each other. Something just wasn't right. The Father Abbot was quite concerned about the future of his monastery, now consisting of himself and three brothers and, thus, he sought counsel from the local rabbi who was known to be a great sage. The abbot went to the rabbi and asked him if he had any advice on what to do to save his monastery. The rabbi felt at a loss and said that he, too, worried about his own congregation; people were too busy and simply were not coming to the synagogue any longer. The two commiserated together and read the Torah. As the abbot was getting ready to return home the rabbi looked at him and said, "One in your home is the Messiah." The abbot walked home puzzled as to what the rabbi's words meant.

When he arrived at the monastery the monks asked the abbot what he had learned. He responded that the rabbi had given him no concrete advice, but he had said in cryptic language, "One in your home is the Messiah." Over the next days and weeks the monks pondered what this might mean. Was it possible that one of them was the Messiah? If that was the case then most certainly it was Father Abbot. He had been the leader for more than a generation. On the other hand it might be Brother Thomas, for he is a holy man and full of light. Certainly it could not be Brother Eldred. He is old, crotchety, and often mean-spirited, but he always seems to be right, no matter what the situation or question. The rabbi could not have meant Brother Phillip. He is very passive -- a real nobody, but one has to admit that he is always there when someone needs assistance.

As they continued to contemplate this question, the old monks began to treat each other with great respect, on the off chance that the one with whom they were dealing really was the Messiah. They again began to live the gospel message. The monastery was a much more prayerful place once again.

Because the monastery was located in a beautiful portion of the forest it was common during the spring, summer, and fall months for families to come and have picnics on the grounds. During this period people who came seemed to sense the new spirit of respect and love that was present at the monastery. The people returned often and one day a young man came to the Father Abbot and asked if he could join the community. Soon others inquired and joined and, thus, after several years the vibrant community at the monastery was again restored because the wisdom of the rabbi had transformed hearts.

The monks in the monastery learned, "through the back door," of the need to treat their brothers with respect. They were converted to an understanding that prayer must be a way of life. Prayer is vocal, but it must also be action. It must be the way we live our

daily lives.¹ There are many different spiritual disciplines, yet prayer is the one that elicits the most angst from people. I don't find many people who are against prayer, however, there are many who claim they don't know how to pray. There is no more awkward moment than standing in a circle at the end of a meeting and saying "so who would like to close us in prayer?" Most eyes turn to the clergy person in the room and by default and a desire not to instill terror in people whom we love, the clergy relent. It is time for this to change!

I understand that prayer can be terrifying. Several years ago we read Barbara Brown Taylor's book, "An Altar in the World." In it she talks about a variety of spiritual disciplines. Finally, in chapter 11, she gets around to talking about prayer. She opens the chapter saying, "I know that a chapter on prayer belongs in this book, but I dread writing it." Now Barbara Brown Taylor is one of the most spiritual people I know. She is a renowned preacher, teacher and one of the preeminent modern theologians. If she feels incompetent when it comes to prayer, what are we to do? We may have many ideas about what prayer is and what it is not. We may argue about what really happens when we pray, what effect it has, or who is really listening. All this wondering and arguing keeps us from doing.

Taylor sites the work of Brother David Steindl-Rast, an Austrian Benedictine monk. He wrote a simple book called *gratefulness, the heart of prayer*, in which he summarizes prayer in two words: Wake up! Now clearly, you would assume prayer can not be summarized in two words. Borrowing the words of the poet Kabir, Brother David explained what he meant:

*Do you have a body? Don't sit on the porch!
Go out and walk in the rain!
If you are in love,
Then why are you asleep?
Wake up, wake up!
You have slept millions and millions of years.
Why not wake up this morning?*²

Waking up means engaging in our own lives, being present to the Holy in our midst each and every moment. This is an act of prayer, being present to each other and the holy. Perhaps prayer is something more than what we have been taught or experienced. Perhaps it is more than being able to recite the words our spiritual ancestors taught us. Perhaps it is more than knowing how to formulate our intentions, petitions, intercessions and praise in ways that do not make us uncomfortable before our friends. Perhaps prayer is more than falling to one's knees in humble adoration. Prayer, according to Brother David, is waking up to the presence of God no matter where you are or what you are doing. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "When I am fully alert to whatever or whoever is

¹ Richard Gribble, "Prayer: A Way of Life," from Sermons on the Second Readings Series II, Cycle B found on Sermon Suite, September 25, 2012.

² *gratefulness, the heart of prayer*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1984. p.7 as quoted in *An Altar in the World*, (Canada: Harper One, 2009) p. 176-7.

right in front of me; when I am electrically aware of the tremendous gift of being alive; when I am able to give myself wholly to the moment I am in, then I am in prayer. Prayer is happening, and it is not necessarily something that I am doing. God is happening, and I am lucky to know that I am in The Midst.”

James teaches the early church that prayer is essential and powerful to the life of the faithful community. We are obligated to pray for each other. We begin by confessing our sins and humbling ourselves before the Holy. There is no right or wrong way to do it. There is a prayer ministry in this church. A few people receive a prayer list on a regular basis. Anyone can be added to the prayer list and anyone can be member of this ministry team simply by letting one of the ministers know of your desire. The list is updated and distributed to those who choose to pray. I don't know how they pray. I don't know how often they pray. That does not matter. It only matters that people who are broken or grieving or distressed or confused know there are people who care about them. The prayer team surrounds those in need with a spirit of love, compassion and hopefulness that is bound to bring healing. The prayers of this group are powerful. James tells us the prayers of the faithful *are* powerful. It would be amazing if there were more people who were involved in this ministry. I know that people are praying all the time, with or without this prayer list. The list helps us to be intentional.

I went to see the new baseball movie the other night, “Trouble with the Curve.” The aging baseball scout played by Clint Eastwood is following a prospect named Bo Gentry that everyone thinks is the next best thing. He is allegedly a fabulous hitter with one flaw that everyone else seems to have missed. I won't ruin it for those of you who may want to see it. There is a scene where Bo is in the on deck circle with two outs in the inning. His team is down by a run and this scrawny kid is up to bat ahead of him. He whispers menacingly in his ear “you better get on base kid.” The kid whispers under his breath, “God, please let me get on base.” The first pitch hits him squarely in the buttox. As he trots to first base he looks up and says, “Guess you were listening.” That is how many of us respond to prayer. We make petitions, we talk to God and then we are surprised when it becomes obvious that God was actually listening. Our answer may not come in the form of a baseball to the behind, but it might be something equally obvious or equally jarring.

It is not enough to pray, even though prayer is powerful. God invites us to go from prayer to care, to move beyond praying to doing. If prayer is communication with God, all that we do and say, all that we think is prayer. When we consider that we are always in the presence of the Holy One and that the Holy One is present in our midst everything we do becomes prayerful. If we petition God to act, then we must act as well. We must call the community together to anoint the sick or help the one who is lost or provide for those who do not have what they need. If we ask God to intercede then we should expect God to send one of us to minister to the one in need, to speak the truth, or to be present to one who is in distress. So often we pray and then we leave it up to God. God hears our prayers and then leaves it up to us. You can be the one to bring healing. You can mend the brokenness. You can make a difference on behalf of one who has no voice and no

power. Your life, the way you respond to someone's plea for comfort or wisdom or presence is the answer prayer.

The monks in the monastery learned through the wisdom of the rabbi that their lives needed to mirror the one whom they worshipped: they had to become like the Messiah. Jesus' whole life, every word and action, was a prayer. James invites us to consider how our whole lives can be prayer. Wake up! Be alive to the presence of the Holy One in our midst every day. James instructs all disciples to be doers of the word and not merely hearers, not only comfortable lifting our prayers to God, but becoming the prayers we seek. In so doing, we build up the body of Christ. May it be so! Amen

Sources:

Richard Gribble, "Prayer: A Way of Life," from the book *Sermons on the Second Readings Series II, Cycle B*.

Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*.