

Over the last several weeks we have been reading through the letter written by James. James is considered to be the brother of Jesus and a leader in the early church. James writes this letter to several churches and the people that made up these churches were having conflicts with one another. So James writes to them to give them guidance in the way they are to treat one another. Today we are going to read the last words that James writes to them.

Read James 5:7-20

This passage includes a call and guidance to the community about how and why they should pray for one another. Included in these instructions from James is guidance about how if anyone of you is sick they should call upon the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil. The word which is translated "elder" is the Greek word "presbuteros" which is where we get our word "Presbyterian." Presbyterian means governed by elders.

Being prayed over and anointed with oil may be something which is pretty new to most of us. Many of us may assume that being anointed with oil is a Catholic thing and you would be partially correct. One of the 7 sacraments in the Catholic Church is the anointing of the sick. This is done for anyone who is sick or who may be in their last moments of life. The term which Catholics used to use was the term "last rites" meaning the anointing with oil just prior to your death.

Rev. Ken Carter is a Methodist pastor and he tells the story about arriving at church one Sunday morning and noticing a car parked out front. Carter went into the church building to begin to make preparations for worship when Marvin came in. Carter had seen Marvin around town before, but never in church. .

Soon other folks began to arrive, and they found their pews, but then they noticed the new person. The people began to whisper to each other, "There's Marvin," and they would almost point to him. They were surprised that someone new was in church--this was a small community--and they were really surprised that it was Marvin.

So Rev. Carter made a point to go visit Marvin that week. No one comes to church, early on a Sunday morning, for the first time, unless something is going on.

When Rev. Carter went by to see Marvin, they began to talk. Marvin said, "I was listening to the radio, and the speaker was talking about bringing the elders to the church to pray over the sick, and anoint them. Do you ever do that?" And then, more slowly, he asked, "Would you do that?" Marvin then told Rev. Carter, "I have cancer, and it's pretty far along."

Rev. Carter was a 20-something Methodist pastor at the time and had never taken part in an anointing before. A few nights later Rev. Carter arrived at Marvin's home again with a lay leader from the church. The lay leader, whose name was Dale, was a little nervous. This was not what Dale had bargained for when he accepted the nomination committee's invitation to be the lay leader of his small rural church!

Rev. Carter approached Marvin and asked him, "Marvin, do you have any sins to confess?" There was a long silence. In a small town everybody knows everything about everyone else, and Marvin was a well-known and divisive person in their community. You were either for Marvin or you were against Marvin. Marvin was estranged from his son, who was in the same business that Marvin was in. Marvin had done his share of hard living.

The pastor and that lay leader prayed for Marvin's healing that night. Marvin did live about six more months. During those 6 months Marvin was there, each Sunday morning, in worship. People began to warm to him. He became more than the object of their curiosity or the focus of their gossip. He became their brother in Christ. Some in the church told the pastor that they had never expected this to happen. Marvin reached out to his son, and they reconciled. All was not perfect. Marvin was still Marvin. His death was not unexpected.

So did the anointing and prayers for healing make a difference? Who knows? Marvin still only lived for 6 months. But in those 6 months there was reconciliation with his son and there was a connection made to people in that church.

In the letter we read from the Bible, James confronted a society that said that the strong should survive and the weak should be discarded. With his words, however, James says that in the laying on of hands the alienation between healthy and sick is overcome. That the strong have an obligation to care for the weak and the weak have an obligation to share their needs with the strong. If we are honest with one another, we know that sometimes we are the strong ones and sometimes we are the weak ones.

This week I was in a meeting with a group of pastors. I would call them my friends. We are a group that comes from a wide theological spectrum. We are both fairly liberal and conservative. We had our meeting together. There was some tension in the room due to some strong personalities. But we finished talking about what we needed to talk about.

At the conclusion of our meeting when we were ready to leave, one of the pastors in the group shared some pretty disturbing news. This pastor had come to this meeting after a doctor visit. The doctor had informed my friend that he had found two tumors on my friend's body. These tumors are very serious. My friend will begin chemotherapy tomorrow and these tumors must be shrunk if my friend is going to survive. I cannot share any further details yet because my friend has not told any others including the members of the church.

When this group of pastors heard this, we stopped our grumbling and we gathered around this pastor. We laid hands on this pastor and we prayed. Some prayed for this pastor to be made well. Some prayed for this pastor's congregation to be understanding and supportive.

I don't know what will physically happen to my friend. My friend is very gifted and the presence of these tumors makes me sad. But I put my hands on my friend's shoulders and I prayed.

In a little while we will have the opportunity to come forward for prayers. There will be a couple of elders present who will have olive oil. This olive oil is from the Holy Land. I brought this oil back with me from Israel when I visited there a few years ago. This oil includes the spices of frankincense and myrrh. Two of the three gifts brought to the baby Jesus by the wise men.

You will be invited forward if you wish. You can share with me or the elder any specific prayer request. Your prayer request may concern a desire for forgiveness or you may just come forward and ask for general prayers for physical healing, or emotional healing, or spiritual healing. After prayers are offered on your behalf, the oil will be placed on your head.

We will use oil because oil was used as medicine when James wrote his words. James connects the physical healing of olive oil with spiritual healing and with forgiveness of sins.

I invite us to hear again these words from James.

Read James 5:13-16

AMEN.

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-Carter, Kenneth, "To Make the Wounded Whole" and found at <http://day1.org/1436-to-make-the-wounded-whole>

-Given: Oct. 14, 2012 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)