

# Sowing Seeds of Faith

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Third Presbyterian Church  
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James 5:13-20

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One of the themes in this year of sowing is sowing seeds of conversation that will lead to dialogue and action. This past Thursday, we gathered for a wonderful conversation with Fr. Joseph Hart on the Francis papacy and his encyclical on the environment. The encyclical is a call to dialogue, and I hope we can find ways to do so,

Next Sunday, World Communion Sunday, will present another opportunity. James Norman, President and CEO of Action for a Better Community and co-convenor of FR=EE, Facing Race, Embracing Equity, will be with us to lead a conversation on race. I hope you can be present.

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Every Tuesday morning at 9:15 in the chapel, we gather for prayer. We sing a little, we read some scripture, we learn about a Presbyterian mission program somewhere in the nation or around the world. But what we do most is pray. Join us.

When I arrived, we began a practice of praying through our membership. We've divided us into 52 groups and pray, simply pray, so many names every Tuesday morning. You all receive a letter saying "here's your date – let us know if you have anything to share." Every so often you will send me an email, or a call, with a concern, usually about someone or something else. Sometimes you will let me know that though you have nothing particular to pray about, you are glad to be remembered. It's a powerful thing simply read through the list, to name names, and for those of us gathered, to think of individual and personal connections we have with each name read.

We also have more recently added an opportunity for you to share prayer concerns to be added to the prayer list. There are little slips in the pews where you can add names, or, again, simply be in touch with one of us. It is powerful every time. Join us, if you can, whether you're up in the alphabet or not.

(sung)

"Before our Father's throne,  
We pour our ardent prayers;

Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one,  
Our comforts, and our cares.”

That’s what we do. We pour our ardent prayers. A new baby. A new job. Cancer. Dementia. A global tragedy or a local shooting. Sometimes, as we are scrolling through the list, someone will say that they simply want to express gratitude for being remembered. That is enough. That is plenty.

(sung)

“What a friend we have in Jesus,  
All our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry  
Everything to God in prayer!  
Oh, what peace we often forfeit,  
Oh, what needless pain we bear,  
All because we do not carry  
Everything to God in prayer!”

What does it look like to carry everything to God in prayer?

Here is one prayer litany from this past week. Our Jewish friends celebrating their high holidays. Our Muslim friends celebrating theirs, coupled with tragic deaths in Mecca. Our Roman Catholic friends welcoming Papa Francisco, and the ripple effects it had on my prayers, at least, as I think about all of the moments when he connected faithfulness to our discipleship in the world. Our Israeli and Palestinian friends. Our climate. Facebook tells me it is diabetes awareness season and suicide prevention month so I thought of all of those facing each reality.

And we pray for members here. Those who are grieving. Those whose dementia advances. Those whose bodies are aching for one reason or another. Those who are depressed or addicted.

What does it look like to carry everything to God in prayer?

Here is what we learn from the letter to James.

“Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ...(P)ray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”

So let’s do it. Here. Now. Some of you don’t like silence, and I count myself in that group. I get nervous when it is too quiet for very long, especially in church. But let’s do it anyway. And let’s take the roadmap James offers as a suggestion.

- Let us, in the silence of our hearts, pray for the suffering...
  - First, if you are suffering, in any way, pray for yourself...
  - Now, let us pray for others who are suffering, near or far...
- If you are sick, in any way, pray for yourself...
- Now, let us pray for others who are sick...
- If you are cheerful about anything in your life, pray a prayer of gratitude...
- If you are cheerful about anything in the world, pray another prayer of gratitude...

How was that? How did it feel?

You might have said to yourself – I am not a minister. I am not a particularly spiritual person. I don't know how to pray. But you do. Because you just did. And you can do it now, hopefully, faithfully. Driving in the car. Standing in line at Wegman's. As you wake up or end the day. Walking in the woods or on the elliptical machine. In a few seconds or for an hour or more. Do not worry about technique. Do not worry about qualifications. Just do it. It is our calling, our opportunity, our mission, our gift.

Some of you watched the pope's message to Congress on Thursday. In it he referred to four Americans. When he said Dorothy Day, because of his lovely accent, some people thought he said Doris Day, at least on my Facebook feed, which would have made for a very different speech altogether.

Dorothy Day was a Catholic leader in the 20<sup>th</sup> century whose extraordinary commitment to social justice and the poor lives still in the Catholic worker movement. Here is what she said about prayer: "Does God have a set way of prayer, a way that He expects each of us to follow? I doubt it. I believe some people-- lots of people-- pray through the witness of their lives, through the work they do, the friendships they have, the love they offer people and receive from people. Since when are words the only acceptable form of prayer?"

So do not worry about technique, or qualifications, as if you could pray wrongly. Pray with words. Pray with actions. Prayer leads to action anyway, from an articulation of our hopes to an enactment of them in the world.

Kathleen Norris said that "Prayer is not asking for what you think you want, but asking to be changed in ways you can't imagine."

I believe that is true. What prayer does is plant a seed, a seed of faith.

I remember in my own family life, when difficult things happened. My father was in a terrible car accident. Our son was born very early and very small. Prayers abounded, across the country.

Now I do not believe, I cannot believe, that to pray one way and not another controls outcomes. People heal from sickness and people die from the exact same diagnosis. God is neither arbitrary nor fickle. Prayer is not a magic incantation. We pray not for results, or to somehow change God's mind. We pray to connect ourselves more deeply with God, with our own spirits, with one another in community.

Let us do pay attention to James, who calls us to prayer and who offers us a roadmap, a blueprint. Let us think about prayers as seeds of faith, that when nurtured and cultivated, lead to action, whether it's taking a casserole to a person recovering from surgery or leading a march on climate change. Who knows how the seeds will grow, but they will not grow if they are not planted. And they will not grow if they do not receive water and air and sunlight.

Along with Dorothy Day, the pope mentioned another well-known American catholic, the priest and mystic Thomas Merton. Perhaps Merton's prayer can be ours: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

Hope and trust as seeds of faith. That's our prayer, our ardent prayer, which we are privileged to take to God, always and every time. Amen.