

SERMON TITLE: "What's It Mean to Be a United Methodist? Prayers"  
SERMON TEXTS: James 5:13-18  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: September 10, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

### **INTRODUCTION**

A couple Sundays ago, we did our annual blessing of the backpacks. We want students, teachers, and school staff to understand that we United Methodists value education and their role in it. We also want the children, especially, to recognize that their identity is connected to the church and to God. Whenever they feel challenged by difficult academics or social dynamics, we want them to picture themselves surrounded by the love of their big church family. Whenever they might be tempted to lie or cheat or be unkind, we want them to remember and find strength in the fact that they are forgiven children of God, called to behave like disciples of Jesus. To protect them from all kinds of potential harms, we want them to have a strong Christian and United Methodist identity.

Having a Christian and United Methodist identity is a good thing for all of us, no matter what our age. That's why, beginning today and continuing through October 8, I'm planning to preach a series of sermons on the topic of what it means to be a United Methodist. Of course, being a United Methodist is a lot more involved than five sermons could ever tell. But whenever someone joins a United Methodist congregation, they speak some vows. And every time someone joins our church, we in the congregation reaffirm our vows to do the same. We promise to uphold the church by our "prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness." Since those words are so central to our promise of Christian life together, I want us to focus our attention on them, one at a time. Today we begin with this scripture from James, chapter five, and the United Methodist identifying characteristic of prayers.

### **1—WHY DO WE PRAY? IT'S GOOD FOR US**

Prayer is something almost all human beings have done at one time or another. But prayer as a regular practice is affirmed repeatedly in scriptures. Verse after verse tells us that a habit and spiritual

discipline of prayer is good for us. Specifically, James 5 tells us that prayer connects our limited, frail, sick, suffering, and sinful humanity to divine goodness and strength—bringing about positive results. Our lives are improved by prayer as we relax in the arms of a loving and capable God. With our stress reduced, our blood pressure and other bio-physical measures improve. With our sins forgiven and our anxieties eased, we're less likely to behave in unhealthy ways, such as making hasty decisions or engaging in addictive behaviors. With a strong sense that we are intimately connected to a divine power for good in the world, we're more likely to believe that the human things we do—like exercise, education, hard work, and patient persistence—will actually help us.

It's quite natural to pray when we're expecting troubles, but that certainly isn't the only time we should go to God in prayer. When we're feeling cheerful and healthy, prayer is an opportunity to rejoice in God's greatness and give thanks, which bolsters our spirits even more. Prayer is also a way for us to care for others who are in need. As we sense God at work in our own personal lives, we recognize many ways that God might be able to help our family members, friends, and people we don't even know who live around the world. We express care for those persons when we lift up positive hopes and requests to God on their behalf. And, of course, as we focus our minds on those good and helpful ideas, our own well-being is improved too. We Christians devote ourselves to prayers because it's good for us and for others!

## **2—HOW DO WE PRAY?**

Having established why we Christians devote ourselves to prayers, we can now look at how we pray. James chapter five gives us a number of ideas. James suggests the effectiveness of both praying alone and praying with a group of supportive and faithful people. In verse 13, we see the instruction that we should sing our prayers as songs of praise. In verse 16, we see the guidance that we should confess our sins to one another as a type of prayer. Those two pieces of advice are good reminders that our prayers aren't just wish lists. Prayer should always include healthy doses of adoration, gratitude, and humble self-reflection. In verse 14, James also mentions anointing someone with oil as a type of healing prayer.

I would add to that how-to list some other methods of praying. We can pray with our eyes shut or open, with our hands clasped or our arms folded across our chests. We can pray standing up, sitting down, lying down, or upside down. We can pray while we're walking, running, or biking. We can pray while we're fishing, folding the laundry, or mowing the lawn. We can read prayers from a book, we can speak our own prayers on the spur of the moment, or we can write prayers in a journal. One of the most fervent prayers I ever prayed happened while I was driving my car through the wide open spaces of Wyoming with my gas gauge on empty. When I finally came to a gas station, I was never so happy to pay exorbitant prices and then pray my thanks to God!

Over the past several weeks, my husband and I have received many cards in the mail with prayers printed in them. These days, our prayers might also take place over digital technology. I remember one time when our congregation was praying for a member who had heart surgery. Before she went into that surgery, the woman had set up a text-message group so members of her family, some close friends, and her pastor could all be in communication about her progress. In the days that followed, everyone on the text message chain offered up their well wishes in various ways—with words, with emojis, with questions, with responses, with some worry, with some encouragement, and with some hopeful hallelujahs. I think there's a sense in which you could say that that entire text message stream was a type of prayer.

There are many ways to pray. United Methodists use them all.

### **3—IN WHAT ATTITUDE AND EXPECTATIONS DO WE PRAY?**

After we figure out why and how we Christians devote ourselves to prayers, we might also wonder in what attitude we should pray. James 5 definitely leans toward high expectations. Verse 15 says, "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up." Verse 16 says that "the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." And verses 17 and 18 give the example of Elijah's successful prayers. James indicates that, even though Elijah "was a human being like us," he was able to stop and start the rain with his prayers.

These verses lead us to an attitude of expectation that our prayers will be heard and answered. And that's great because prayer is a spiritual discipline of hopefulness. Prayer is a practice based on positive thinking and big ideas. Many of us recall the verse where Jesus says, "For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." We also remember Jesus saying, if parents give good gifts to their children, how much more will God "give good things to those who ask!" (MT. 7:8, 11).

But that doesn't mean we should enter into prayer with an attitude of entitlement, like a spoiled brat demanding things from God. In earlier verses of James 5, the author writes that we should be patient and endure, without grumbling. In James chapter four, the author warns against asking wrongly for things that are only worldly pleasures. He indicates that "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." And James says that, instead of arrogantly assuming we know how things should and will happen, we should seek and accept the will of the Lord.

Prayer is often a great mystery to us. I'm sure everyone here has at some time or other prayed for an outcome and wondered why God didn't make that seemingly good thing happen. Our sense of failure in prayer has caused us to doubt our faith, our motives, our wisdom, and our worthiness. Sometimes the lack of results in prayer has caused us, or others we know, to doubt God's very existence.

I guess that's why it's so important for us to have the right kind of attitude and expectations in regard to prayer. The point of prayer is not to promote unrealistic expectations or make us frustrated to the point of losing our faith. The point of prayer is to help us deal with the challenges of life. Those who have prayed the most will testify that God answers prayers in multiple ways: sometimes with "Yes," sometimes with "No," and sometimes with "Maybe later." God's response to our prayers can also be something like, "Well, I hear you. But what are **you** willing to do to make that happen?" Prayer is for the purpose of giving us hope, but also for helping us deal with disappointment when things don't go the way

we'd prefer. Maybe the most important thing about prayer is that the on-going conversation reminds us that our caring friend God is always with us, no matter what we're going through.

Prayer isn't some kind of magical incantation. There's no secret formula or code words that will always produce the results we want. Our conversations with God are more about developing an enduring spiritual relationship than quick fixes. It's absolutely true that our prayers can stimulate significant healing, strength, and encouragement—but it really helps if we incorporate reasonable attitudes and expectations into our Christian devotion to prayers.

### **CONCLUSION**

Maybe you've heard in the news that the G20 countries are meeting this weekend in New Delhi, India. Like many cities do when dignitaries and the media come to visit, New Delhi wants to show itself as a clean, orderly, and safe place. In New Delhi, that positive-identity effort includes chasing away small Rhesus Macaques monkeys that have a bad habit of aggressively pestering people and invading human habitations. To scare off those pesky Rhesus Macaques in a humane way, the city has trained 40 human beings to serve as professional monkey impersonators. Those 40 persons are now busy making the guttural sounds of the larger Gray Langur monkeys which are natural predators of the smaller Rhesus Macaques. If the human impersonators are successful, their vocal utterances will be identified as a threat, and the Rhesus Macaques will stay away from the G20 Summit.

Whether we're trying to scare off pesky monkeys or we're representing Jesus in our world, identity is important. Our United Methodist identity is shaped by many factors, and one of the most important is our commitment to prayers. We understand that the purpose of prayer is to bring us comfort, courage, and hope—which it does best when we come to prayer humbly, seeking God's wisdom and will over our own. We engage in this spiritual practice in solitude, in groups, and in just about every imaginable way because we believe that prayer is powerful and effective. We believe that our prayers improve our lives and the lives of other people. That's why our United Methodist identity is characterized by prayers.