

Sermon for Sunday, October 17, 2021
James 5:7-20

The Patience of Farmers, the Prayers of Faith

It's hard to be patient. Whether one is waiting for a train, or the one-lane, road construction traffic coming from the other direction on Highway 50 to pass, so we can finally get our turn. Whether one is waiting for the results from a medical test or a grade on a college term paper; for a call-back on a job interview, or a call that your loved ones have made it safely to their destination; whether we're waiting for vindication, or for the second coming of Christ.

I thought it was significant that James uses "the farmer" as an example of one who knows how to wait. Because I've been learning a bit about farming and farmers in my first three years here. And it definitely seems to me that farmers know how to wait. Maybe because they get lots of practice. Waiting for the winter to pass and spring to come. Waiting for it to rain, or to quit raining. Waiting for the fields to dry out enough that they can safely drive into them with their tractors. Waiting for the seeds they patiently planted to finally sprout. Waiting for it to rain. Waiting as they watch their crops slowly grow, wondering what kind of crop it will be this year. Waiting for the right conditions to begin harvest. Waiting for the price of the grain they just harvested to go up (even a little). Waiting for it to rain again—or even snow, so the winter wheat gets its needed moisture. On and on it goes. I would guess that waiting is a way of life for farmers. And so, therefore, is patience. Farmer know better than anyone that everything has its season.

The believers to whom James was writing were pretty much all waiting for the same thing. Namely, the Second Coming of Christ. They had been told that he would come again. To finally set things right. To separate the sheep from the goats. To usher in the kingdom of God.

But when will he come? How much longer will they have to wait? Will it even be in their lifetimes?

Waiting patiently is one of the most important tasks of the church, James is saying. Whether it's waiting for the Second Coming of Christ, or the pandemic to end, or our church to grow, or a vote on whether to close or keep going (as Trinity is doing today), or any other sign from God. Everything has its season. Our job is to wait, to trust, to be patient.

And in the meantime, James is saying, we the church have other very important tasks to perform. He lists six of them in this passage. Prayer. Praise. Confessing. Forgiving. Correcting. Welcoming.

But let's talk about prayer. You could say that prayer means bringing our needs and concerns and worries and yearnings to God. Whatever they are. Whenever someone is suffering. Whenever someone is sick. In need of forgiveness. In need of correction. In need of welcoming, or welcoming back.

It might seem like James is confused about who should pray for what. One moment he's saying the person who is suffering or sick should pray. Almost as if it's their job, their responsibility to pray for themselves. Really? Then James says, no, the sick person should call for the elders, and they should pray over him or her. Then he says we should pray for one another! So which is it, James?

Here is how we might make sense of the confusion, and hear what James is really saying. Put the em-pha-sis on the right syl-la-ble. Prayer should simply be a daily part of any

church's life. We should all be doing it. We are all empowered to do it. Including those times when we're the ones suffering, or sick. Our prayers for ourselves are powerful, and effective. Prayer is our job. Every one of us.

But, he says, we should also boldly ask others for prayer whenever we feel we need it. Prayer is the church's job. Every one of us.

At the same time, there will be people in any church who have been specially called by God to the ministry of prayer (James refers to these as the "Elders.") That's what our *Call to Worship* this morning was about—remember? "Christ is like a single body that has many parts. It is still one body though every part is different." It lists feet and hands, ears and eyes. But it goes on to say, "If one part suffers, all parts share the pain."

As it happens, we do here at First Mennonite Church have a group of people who feel a special calling to pray regularly for the church. In fact, they get together every other week (albeit virtually, for now). They are what we might call "prayer warriors." They recognize the power of prayer. They recognize that when they pray, it is no less powerful and effective than when Elijah himself prayed. And look what he did!

That doesn't mean that we will get exactly what we want. Praying for healing doesn't mean—it clearly can't mean—that we or others will receive precisely the kind of healing we are praying for. That is not what James is saying. What he is saying is, first, that prayer is powerful, and second, it is something we should all be doing. As to the result of all this prayer? Whatever it is, it will be good.

James, when all is said and done, amidst all the exhortation and exhortation, has great hope for the Church. We are resilient. We are strong. We are gifted. We are a work in progress. We are God's ears and eyes, hands and feet. That's right; imperfect as we are.

We are holy, set apart, powerful. And if we ever forget that, we can always come back to James' *last two verses*, which might have seemed at first like an odd way to end a letter, but maybe now we can see it wasn't odd at all: "**My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.**" And that, James is saying, pretty much covers everything.

Let us pray together. Dear Lord, help us to be patient, and to trust that everything has its season, that everything—past, present, and future—is in your hands; that Jesus will come again to usher in your kingdom, in your time, not ours.

And in the meantime, help us to claim those tasks that are ours as your church: prayer. Praise. Confessing. Forgiving. Correcting. Welcoming. Welcoming back. And especially, prayer. Help us to realize and remember that prayer is all of our responsibility. Help us to claim its power. Even as we leave its outcome to you. Amen.