

## **With and For**

James 5:13-20

Relief comes this week, finally. At the very end, James eases up on us. He shifts gears and goes from telling us about all of the bad things we are doing, to telling us what we should be doing instead. He goes from the negative to the positive, from 'don't do this,' to 'do this.'

You may have noticed that James is the master of the rhetorical question.

- Do you, with your acts of favoritism, really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?
- Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith without works is dead?
- Who is wise among you?
- Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?

He knows perfectly well what the answers will be. He knows that we are bickering and bullying each other in our churches. He knows that there are class distinctions. He knows that there are only a handful of people in any given church who are truly wise. He knows that 90% of the time we are Christians in name only, not in our doing or in our communal lives together. And he aims to change that.

So he asks us another rhetorical question or two:

- Are any among you suffering? Of course there are.
- Are any of you cheerful? Well, yes.
- How about sick? That, too.

And his fourth rhetorical question is apparently so rhetorical that he never even bothers to ask it:

- So what do you do with and for all those people in your congregations who are suffering, cheerful and sick?

In other words, what does your communal life together look like? Early on he was asking us – okay telling us – to examine our own lives. Now he's telling us to look at our church life, our communal life. How do we respond when someone is suffering? When someone has been widowed, divorced or a job has been lost, or a teenager has veered off course in life?

And what about when someone is cheerful? When a baby is born, or a scholarship has been won, or new love has come along to help mend a broken heart?

Or if someone is sick? Then what? Whether it's the flu or an addiction or MS or lung cancer, how do we treat the person who is ill?

Let's be clear about what James isn't asking, what he isn't wanting to know. He isn't asking if we have an effective program in place to identify people who are having some kind of 'life event,' good or bad, to support and encourage them and make sure they don't fall through the

cracks. He isn't asking if we remember to take a meal to someone, or if we call them regularly to see how they are doing. And he's not asking about how we mark and celebrate births and weddings and new homes and graduations.

Here's what he does want to know: do we, in our life together here in the church, show that we really and truly believe that God is the source of our life; the author and the sustainer of life? In other words, when there is a joy, a true joy in your life, do we simply send a card or bake a cake or give a hug, or do we give praise to God, the giver of all good gifts, for this great joy. Do we heartily sing joyous, even raucous songs of praise to God, recognizing that it is God who has accomplished this marvelous thing? That God gave you the brains and the drive that got you that scholarship? That God brought this miraculous new life into the world? That God is working a new thing in your life that brought you to this time of transition to a new job, or a new love? What James is asking is, when we stand and share our joys with the congregation, is it merely an announcement of our good fortune or pride at having the kids home for the holiday, or are we really giving thanks to this amazing God of ours?

And when someone is sick, do we simply surround them with our support and encouragement, or do we truly believe that our prayers accomplish something? Do we really believe that the God who made us wants health for us? Do we pray with and for people with any measure of confidence that God hears our prayers and that God answers our prayers? Do we pray with fervor? With faith? With the expectation that God will do something in this person's life? Are our prayers perfunctory, or are they the bedrock of our communal life?

And here's the tough one: what about when someone is suffering? Is there a place for them in the church? I knew a woman once who disappeared from church for a few years. She had been faithful and active, then just vanished for a while. A number of years later she came back and we became friends and the subject of her absence came up one day. She told me that that was when her son was a teenager and got into drugs and some trouble with the law. Everyone else in church had "good" kids, kids on the honor roll, kids destined for greatness, or so she thought. She disappeared because she was ashamed and embarrassed. She didn't want to admit that her life was less than perfect. That her children were less than perfect.

Is there a place in the church for people whose lives are less than perfect? People who feel ashamed and humiliated by their life's circumstances? Divorce? Unemployment? Depression? Kids who are struggling? Financial problems? And again, the real question isn't whether or not we have appropriate and effective programs to care for and support them. It isn't about our kindness or openness. The real question is, do we honestly believe that God can and will do something in their lives? Do we do more than pray that God will comfort them as they limp along in pain? Or do we pray that God will do something mighty and life-transforming in them?

Here is the crux of what James is getting at. First he's told us not to be communities that quarrel and bicker and mirror the world's prejudices and class distinctions. But even if we all got along great and had a wonderful intergenerational, multicultural congregation of rich and poor alike, he'd still be telling us that we needed to be more than a community of warmth and support and encouragement. That's not enough. What James is telling us is that we are to be a community of truth-telling; a community of people who know beyond a shadow of a doubt that it is solely by

the grace and goodness of God that we draw each breath, and greet each morning, and earn each dollar. It is solely by the mercy and compassion of God that pain and suffering does not break us. We are not a humanitarian organization. We aren't here just to bolster people up as they make their way through life's ups and downs, sometimes celebrating, sometimes offering compassion and casseroles. We are the people of God, the God who gives good gifts; the God who redeems our lives from the pit. Does that mean we do away with the casseroles and the phone calls and the effective programs? No, of course not. But it means we don't just celebrate and congratulate, we praise God. And we don't just commiserate and support, we pray, earnestly, faithfully, expectantly, believing that God will answer our prayers.

This would be a great place to end, but James isn't quite done with us. There's one other thing James brings up, one other thing we need to do if we are a community of truth-telling. We are to sing songs of praise with those who are cheerful, pray with and for those who are sick or suffering, and guess what? We are to confront sin when we see it. Not because we are so perfect, or because we get any great thrill out of pointing out someone else's flaws and offenses, but so that that same power of God that heals suffering and illness can also be at work in the sinner. We tell the truth, not out of meanness, but out of love, for the spiritual, mental and physical health of the person and the community itself.

Being a community of truth-telling is messy business, isn't it? We Americans, in particular, are all about privacy and independence and staying out of other people's business and keeping them out of ours. But in this community that God has cobbled together that we call the Church, there is a messy tangle of lives all bound up together. We don't keep secrets. We don't hide things from each other. We don't politely ignore sin or disruptive behavior or embarrassing struggles other people are going through. We don't hide behind the excuse that, it's between us and God. We tell the truth about ourselves, about each other, and about God. We pray with and for each other. We praise God with each other. We share our lives, all parts of our lives, and we look to God, either with thanks or for redemption.

We are a community of truth-tellers, and this is the truth: we are all broken people, every one of us, and it is only by God's hand that we thrive and survive. God is the source of all of our gifts and blessings, and God is the healer of all life's ills – and make no mistake, God can still heal, even when God does not cure. Our life together is based on this truth, and no other.

What is it that characterizes you as a church? James asks. And he doesn't want to know that we are a friendly, caring congregation or one with some great programs for the kids. He wants to know what place God has in our life. He wants to know if we are a church that finds every bit of its strength and joy in God. And that, of course, is not a rhetorical question.