

THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER – PRAYER SUNDAY – MAY 12, 15 & 16, 2004
St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI

WE ARE NOT HELPLESS! James 5:13-20

How often do you feel helpless? How often have you encountered a situation where you had no idea what you were going to do? How many times have we sat at the bed of a loved one who was sick and dying and we wondered, "what can I do?" I am sure that many of us at one time or another have felt weak and unable to take charge and fix what was wrong or to make things better and ok.

Today is the sixth Sunday of Easter that has been historically designated as Prayer Sunday by the Christian church. The Word of God before us draws our attention to the importance and the power of prayer. As we meditate on the words of James we would like to focus our attention on this truth – **WE ARE NOT HELPLESS!** **I) There Are Times In My Life And In Yours When We Feel That We Have No Control.** That is not a pleasant and comforting feeling. It can be very frightening. We feel vulnerable and powerless. However, we need to remember the encouragement that James gives us. He points you and me to **II) The Powerful Tool That God Has Given Us.**

OFTEN WE FEEL WE HAVE NO CONTROL

There are many times in each of our lives where we may think and feel that our lives are careening out of control. The car breaks down, the refrigerator stops running. One of our children falls and breaks a leg. One of our elderly parents is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. And it appears that one catastrophe after another is being heaped upon us. What do you do?

We all have developed through our lives ways of attempting to cope and handle things so that we don't completely fall apart and stop functioning ourselves. Some people may go into denial and just refuse to accept that anything has happened. They attempt to continue on by ignoring and refusing to accept that these things have occurred. Others will approach it with the attitude that I can fix anything. They feel that they have to be the strong one and they can take care of anything. Still others become extremely angry and they lash out at anyone and everyone and blame others for what has happened to them. They curse God for allowing these things to happen in their lives. They question how a good and loving God could allow all this to happen in their lives. They wonder if God even exists or even is concerned or cares about them. In the verses prior to our reading James deals with this whole issue of suffering and tells us not to use God's name for swearing. Then there are those who completely shut down. They go into a deep depression. They are so angry over what has happened yet they do not know how to express their anger and so they brood and sit on it and finally stop functioning altogether.

What causes all these reactions? It is the realization that I am not in control. I cannot stop the car from breaking down. I can't stop the refrigerator from giving up the ghost. I have no control over accidents that may happen or over incurable diseases.

THE POWERFUL TOOL THAT GOD GIVES US

When you come to such a realization, what do you do? Well, we've all heard people say, "When all else fails, pray!" Or people who have commented, "There's nothing more that I can do than pray." It almost sounds that prayer has become the last resort. When nothing else works, then, just then you might want to try prayer. What a sad comment on people's thoughts on prayer. Prayer is not the last resort. Prayer is the first thing we are to do. In fact, prayer is a powerful tool that our God has entrusted to us to use daily.

Listen to what James says, “Is any one of you in trouble. Let him pray. Is any one happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.” (Vv. 13-14) When you are facing troubles and problems, don’t stew over them, worry and fret. Pray!! God commands us. He says, “Call upon me in the day of trouble and I will deliver you and you will honor me.” (Psalm 50:15) We place these troubles in God’s hands. We ask him to help us and we go forward working at them with all our strength and might. We do this knowing that the Lord is in control and he will work everything out for our good. Prayer isn’t just something that we use when there is trouble. When we are happy we need to sing songs of praise. We need to praise and thank God for the good that he so freely and abundantly showers upon each of us everyday. So often we take this all for granted and we fail to praise and thank God. Usually when things are going well, we don’t do a lot of praying do we? But the moment we need something or things aren’t going well, then we might pray. When you’re happy pray – sing songs of praise. Everyday we have reasons to praise God. Think of what he has done for each of us. He gave his only Son as a human sacrifice for our sins. Jesus endured the temptations of the devil and the ridicule of an unbelieving world for us. What better reason to be happy. We are forgiven. We are children of God and we have an eternal home with our Lord in paradise. But now when sickness comes knocking at our door, what should we do? James says, “Call for the elders of the church and have them oil us with oil and pray over us.” What is James talking about here? Is he talking about last rites when someone is dying and we put oil on the person and pray over him? No. In fact, we aren’t exactly sure what James might be referring to. There are two possibilities. We know that oil was often used to assist in the healing process. Remember when the Good Samaritan found the Jewish man beaten and dying along the road. What did he do? He cleaned the man up and put wine and oil on his wounds. Wine with its alcohol as an antiseptic to cleanse the wound and then oil to keep the skin soft and assist in the healing. Maybe when you were a child and had an earache, your mother warmed some olive oil and put it in your ear to help ease the pain. This may be what James is talking about. Another possibility is that when Jesus first sent out his followers to proclaim the good news that he was the promised Savior of the world, he gave them special powers to heal the sick and he had them anoint sick people with oil and heal them. This was part of the sign that accompanied the healing and gave visible proof that they were from God and were proclaiming the truth. Just as when Jesus healed the man born blind, he spit on the ground and then made some mud and placed it on the man’s eyes as he restored his sight. So today we pray for the sick and we also make use of medicines and other means to assist a person who is ill. Yet we recognize that the only one who can heal any of us is the Lord our God.

James continues, “And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” (Vv.15-16a) Why after talking about prayer and sickness does James suddenly turn to the issue of sin? Well, the reason that there is sickness in this world is because of sin. If you and I were perfect, we would never get sick. But we are infected with the germ of sin and that leads to illnesses and finally to death. Also sin and guilt can lead to physical weakness and illness. Remember when David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and then covered up that sin by having Bathsheba’s husband killed, how did that affect David physically? He tells us, “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.” (Psalm 31:3-4) David was physically ill and what was causing it? His guilt over the sins he had committed. That is why it is so important that we confess our sins and that we hear the good news, “The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die.” (2 Samuel 12:13b) Another thing that happens when you and I get sick is that we often think, “Now God is getting even with me for some wrong that I have done. God is punishing me for my sins.” It is then when we again need to hear those soothing and healing words, “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1) I remember years ago an elderly woman was stricken with an illness and as I was ministering to her, suddenly she began to pour out things that she had done 45 years before. She was confessing her sins and she needed to hear, “Jesus died for those sins. God will not punish you. He punished Jesus for you. God has forgiven and forgotten all your wrongs.” It was amazing to see how that changed her entire mental and emotional state and soon she began to recover from her physical illness.

Prayer is powerful. Listen to what James writes, “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. (*He now gives us an example from one of the prophets of old*) Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed and the heavens gave rain and the earth produced its crops.” (Vv. 16b-18) Why is prayer so powerful? It is because we have an almighty God who has commanded us to pray and has promised to hear and answer our prayers in accord with his will. It is not we the people who pray who are powerful. It is not the prayer in and of itself that is so powerful. It is the Lord our God. James points out that Elijah was just like you and me. He was a sinful human being. He had his faults and shortcomings and yet he prayed and look what God did. As you read the pages of the Bible we find example after example of God answering prayers and displaying his great love and power. When King Hezekiah was told by the prophet Isaiah to get his house in order because he was going to die, Hezekiah prayed and before Isaiah had left the palace courtyard, God told Isaiah to go back to the king and tell him that he had heard his prayer and he would add 15 years to his life. (2 Kings 20) When Joshua and the Israelites were fighting the Amorites in the battle at Gibeon, Joshua prayed that God would give them more daylight and the sun stood still in its course and stopped from going down for about a full day until the people of God had defeated their enemy. (Joshua 10:1-15) These displays of God’s power in answer to prayer can also be found throughout the pages of the history of the Christian church on earth. We are told about a man named George Mueller who operated an orphanage in Bristol, England. Over a period of 60 years he cared for 10,000 orphans, receiving five million dollars in gifts. He began his work with only two schillings. Throughout his entire ministry he could recount examples of God’s answer to prayers. One morning there was no milk or any food whatsoever to feed the hundreds of hungry orphans. Mr. Mueller sat down at the breakfast table and prayed with the orphans, “Father, we thank you for the food you are going to give us.” Shortly after that there was a knock at the door. It was a baker who informed Mr. Mueller that he was awakened at 2 a.m. that morning with the desire that he should bake bread for the orphanage. A few minutes later a milkman came to the door and informed Mr. Mueller that his milk wagon had broken down and he had to get rid of the cans of milk before he could take his wagon into town for repairs. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. It is so powerful and effective because we have an almighty God who loves us and works all things for our good.

James concludes his words to us with the encouragement to reach out in our actions and prayers to those who are wandering from the truth of God’s Word. “My brother if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.” (Vv.19-20) The devil is out there trying to draw you and me and every disciple of Jesus away from the Lord and into eternal torment in hell. We need to talk to each other and encourage one another. We need to sit with our loved ones and encourage them to be faithful in the use of God’s Word. We need to be in daily prayer for each and every one of us that we are not led astray. For it is God’s will that we all be saved and come to eternal peace in glory.

People of God, pray and keep on praying for those who wander and stray. We are not helpless in any situation in our lives. We have the powerful tool given us by our almighty God. We have prayer. Pray and keep on praying. For the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

Amen.