

# LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

## 'Thoughts and Prayers' are Not Enough

James 2:14-26

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

May 20, 2023

"What good is it if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely faith cannot save, can it?" James loved himself some controversy. Now, we don't actually know who this James was. Tradition holds that he was the younger brother of Jesus, the leader of the Christian Church in Jerusalem after Jesus threw down the ultimate older sibling card and ascended to heaven, leaving James to deal with the fallout. Scholars say that's highly unlikely, but since they don't have any better ideas about who James was, they can't claim with complete certainty who he wasn't. Some have suggested that claims of James' sibling status were necessary if this letter was to be taken seriously, since it seems to stand in a bit of opposition to Paul, who was seen by many as one of the most authoritative voices in the early church. If James' words were not to be lost, he had to have some claim of authority, too. In the end, it's really speculation. We don't know who James was. But we are fortunate his writing has endured.

His letter is essentially a protest. "Come **on**, Church," he seems to be saying. But remember: protest and hope hold hands. You only protest if you have hope, even if it the smallest, slightest glimmer, that something better is possible.

"Come **on**, Church," he says. And yes, he was writing to a particular group of people at a particular time, but by virtue of being included in our holy book of scripture, we believe his writing carries meaning and instruction not just for the church he knew, but for the church we know, too. I wonder what James would say if he were alive and among us today.

On two separate occasions, I have had the good fortune of leading a group of Presbyterians on a pilgrimage to Iona. Iona is a small island in the Inner Hebrides on the western coast of Scotland. It's a pilgrimage in part because by the time you get there from here, you have taken a couple of planes, a couple of trains, a bus, a boat, and finally, when you arrive, you complete the journey on your own two feet. But it's also a pilgrimage because Scotland is steeped in Presbyterian history, and Iona is not just an island, it's a community of faith, too. Which is why once you have arrived at the destination of your pilgrimage, members of the Iona community will invite you to take another one, hiking miles across their island and back again. It is one of their most beloved and holy traditions. We walk, they say, because a life of faith is best expressed through action, through movement. Not surprisingly, their faith is rooted in social justice work. But their pilgrimage also involves frequent stops for prayer, no matter how many dozens or hundreds of times some of them have walked that path, because, they say, if your heart isn't steeped in prayer, your feet won't know where to go.

"What good is it if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. Show me your faith apart from works; I by my works will show you faith. You believe in God — wonderful. But even demons believe in God. A person is justified by works, not by faith." Too often we oversimplify what James is saying here. We hear him saying, "Your actions are what will save you." And like I said before, we lift him up as a counterpoint to the apostle Paul, who writes, "We know that a person is justified not by works, but through faith." So we summarize them this way:

James cares only about works; Paul cares only about faith. But that is unfair to both of them. And if we are talking about the relationship between faith and works, or the relationship between prayer and and action, we owe it to them, and to ourselves, to avoid oversimplification.

Think of it this way. Paul says we are justified by faith because he is deeply concerned with how we become right with God. And to Paul, that happens only through the person of Jesus Christ — only through his death and resurrection. We can't do it on our own, no matter how hard we try, no matter how many good things we do. We are saved because of what God has done for us through Christ. Period. That's Paul. But here's the thing — James would not argue with that. James is not making a claim about how we become right with God. He's not making an argument about the means of salvation. He's saying, if you really understand your faith, your behavior will demonstrate that. Do you see the difference? Paul says, "This is how we are saved — through Christ." And James says, "Because we **are** saved through Christ — this is how we are to act."

James and Paul both believe faith and works go hand in hand. And the theologian John Westerhoff agrees. He says that faith is a verb. That faith is a way of acting, of living, much more than it is a way of believing. Faith isn't something you have, he says. It's something you do. Westerhoff says we ought to make a regular practice of asking one another, "So how was your faithing today? Did you faith well? Did you faith a lot, or a little, today? How do you plan to faith tomorrow?"

I imagine you have heard and seen the rallying cry from which today's sermon title is borrowed: "Thoughts and prayers are not enough." It surfaces in many instances of injustice, though perhaps most often in response to mass shootings — because the most common public response to these tragedies is a statement that thoughts and prayers are with the victim's families. It comes swiftly and predictably, prompting a now equally swift and predictable, "Thoughts and prayers are not enough." And then somewhat more recently, protest signs and online memes have featured the words "thoughts and prayers" crossed out with the words "policy and change" written underneath.

I appreciate the sentiment, but I don't love it. It's a great bumper sticker. But thoughtful, nuanced theology rarely fits on a bumper sticker. Thoughts and prayers are not enough. That is 100 percent true. When it comes to any number of issues, policy and change are deeply and desperately needed. That is 100 percent true. But to suggest that we can only claim one of those things at a time is a false dichotomy. There are about a billion verses in scripture that compel us to action, but none more strongly than James. "Faith without works is dead," he says. "Dead. If you want to believe, without showing me what actions that inspires in your daily living, you're wasting my time and yours," he says. But you know what else he says? "Is anyone suffering? You should pray. Is anyone cheerful? You should sing songs of praise. Is anyone sick? You should call for the elders of the church, and the elders should pray. Prayer that comes from faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you and the world will know healing. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective and can achieve great things."

James staked his whole claim on the idea that faith without works is dead. He also insisted that prayer is one of the most powerful tools we have. A careful reading of his words, though, makes clear: prayer is essential. Prayer changes things. And yet prayer is not the works our faith demands. Prayer *reveals* the works our faith demands.

Thomas Merton, an American theologian and Trappist monk, always claimed, "When I pray, I do not pray to change God. I pray that I might be changed." And Andrew Newberg, a neuroscientist, he wrote a book called *How God Changes Your Brain*. He scanned the brains of Catholic nuns and Buddhist monks who had spent years of their lives in prayer. And compared to the normal, or average, human brain, the scans of

the nuns and monks revealed a striking difference. The part of the brain that focuses on self was diminished. The part of the brain that focuses on others was enhanced. Prayer literally changed people's brains.

When we pray the way Jesus taught, we are more aligned with God's activity in this world. When we pray the way Jesus taught, we are truer, more faithful followers of Jesus himself. When we pray the way Jesus taught, we are more attuned to the presence of the Holy Spirit, and where the Spirit is calling us to go, and what the Spirit is calling us to do, and who the Spirit is calling us to be. Prayer is the means, not the end. Prayer is the beginning. But prayer is the essential beginning. Because like the good people of Iona understand, if your heart isn't steeped in prayer, your feet won't know where to go.

Now, if you are anything like me, you might sometimes think, "I wish I knew what to do. I know action is needed, and I want to act, but ... what will actually make a difference?" When I find myself asking that question, I generally need to check my praying. Am I praying, "God, show these other people the right way to act, the right things to think"? Am I praying, "God, show the world a miracle is still possible?" Or am I praying, "God, show me what is needed. God, sturdy my heart and steady my steps. God, make clear to me the work is mine to do in this moment." None of the prayers I just mentioned are bad, or wrong. But if I'm trying to figure out what I can do, I need to make sure that's what I'm actually praying about. "The work that is ours to do" is a line I stole from a friend, by the way. He says it all the time. We don't have to fix the whole world. We don't have to revolutionize every social system. We don't have to have every answer to every possible contingency. We just have to do the work that is ours to do. However big or small it may seem. Everyone can do the work that is theirs to do.

The bad news is all of this means we are playing the long game. That's why James also says, "Beloved, you must be patient as you wait for the coming of the Lord. You must wait patiently, strengthening your resolve, looking forward to what is promised. Take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord as an example of patient resolve and steadfastness. Look at how we honor those who have practiced endurance. With endurance, you will see what the Lord will accomplish, the Lord who is full of compassion and mercy." The bad news is that committing to a life of faith, a life that engages prayer so that we might have clarity about our actions, it almost always means playing the long game. The good news is, if this is a game, the game isn't over. "Come **on**, Church," James says. He's more than a little frustrated. I understand his frustration. Thoughts and prayers are not enough. When it comes to social justice and moral responsibility, thoughts and prayers will never be enough. But they are essential. Rooting ourselves in prayer increases the odds that our actions have the staying power they will need, until our fervent hope becomes faithful reality.

"Come **on**, Church." The world is waiting to see what we can do. God is, too.