

Walking With You Is My Prayer
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC,
Lexington
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For a portion of September, we've read James' letter to early Christians. To catch you up before today's reading I'm going to turn to an Oxford Bible professor, AKM Adam: "The preceding chapters in the Epistle of James have described the ideal of a congregation that lives cooperatively, harmoniously, in concord with heaven's peaceable grace — and that repudiates wrangling, privilege, and domination. James addresses communities more than individuals... and he promotes an ethic of integrity that emphasizes building one another up."¹

Now, we turn to James' final words - though I wonder if somewhere along the way, a scribe forgot to re-copy a very last word - "be of good courage. Love, James." Ah well. This is how James' letter ends - and there is good news here:

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-26-2/commentary-on-james-513-20-2>

James 5:13-20

13 Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. ¹⁷Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, ²⁰you 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.

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When I was first ordained, I had a problem. Most of the clergy gatherings I went to seemed to have an underlying

agenda: comparing and competing. Sometimes we'd share resources, but we spent a lot of time puffing up.

And then something changed.² The late Sue Dickerman, longtime conference staff person, along with a couple of other wise folks, cast a vision of clergy communities of practice - clergy covenant groups. Some would be for longtime clergy, and some for newly ordained pastors. I joined a new clergy group, led by seasoned pastor John Hudson. (You will note I am deliberately naming some wonderful people here.) In that first group John helped us to build trust and share resources and walk together through the first years of ministry. We could be truthful and also compassionate, we practiced accountability but also forgiveness. We were not alone. It wasn't about competition, it was about shared ministry, a safe place for debriefing the wilds of the pastoral life, and a place where we could ask each other hard questions.

“Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.”

That's what we did.

² <https://www.ucc.org/communities-of-practice/>

Then, when that group came to a conclusion, in 2010 Sue Dickerman helped me get into a seasoned clergy group led by Karen Fritz. And while our members have changed (and Karen retired), it is this clergy covenant group that I am still part of today. We meet ten times a year, we pray together and for each other. We go on retreat together, we have a Slack channel, we are each other's first call when we encounter trouble. We Zoomed, I kid you not, daily, during the pandemic. I have said many times, and I mean this: being part of a clergy community of practice has kept me in ministry. And it's not just me - in these 14 years with as many as 8 members, we have all gone through something where our covenant with each other has saved our faith, saved our ministry, and maybe even saved our lives. Karen, Karla, Barbara, Stacy, Cheryl, Anna, Laura Ruth (yes, that Laura Ruth) are my partners in this work. We weep with each other. We pray for each other, and each other's congregations, and each other's kids. (I preached here in 2019 about how we prayed for young Gabe, now healthy and in in highschool thanks be to God.)

“¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”

Ah, the delicate subject of confession. Of sin, of missing the mark that God has set before us, of turning toward new life, of seeking grace. Let me tell you also that in our clergy group we confess to each other, and we offer each other grace.

It was Laura Ruth that taught us the concept of flashing our lights at one another, a wisdom she learned from the 12 step world. If you are driving down a dark road and you see a car coming without their lights on, you flash your headlights - you know this idea - so that other car can get back to driving safely. There are moments when every one of us veers off the path, forgets our headlights, says the wrong thing, takes the wrong action, does harm. In our clergy group, using curiosity and gentleness, we have built a circle of trust that allows that flashing of lights. I wonder, we say... We assume good intentions and offer grace, but also help one another get back on track. We practice humility, believing that our circle is trustworthy and we might have something that needs adjusting. I've been in both places in our covenant group - gently guided and gently guiding.

“19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another,
²⁰you 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.”

A lot of us get tense when the Bible uses the language of sin. We start feeling judged, we wonder if God's love and acceptance have disappeared, we wonder if our fellow church members are going to start yelling. I have an invitation to us: to consider that our church is like my clergy group. At its best, it's a group so trustworthy and loving that when one of us forgets to turn the headlights on, we're willing to lovingly flash the lights to get them back home. It doesn't happen often, thankfully, but to call someone in can be an act of love and healing.

And love and trust applies also when we are discerning and deciding things together, so that even when there is disagreement amongst us, the love and trust we have for each other - the prayers we have said for each other, the meals we have brought, the hugs we have given and received - helps us work together as a church. We are more than a golf-club or an advocacy group - we are a church.

We're going to practice this again today, as we address a pretty straightforward vote just after worship ends. We're going to start with our covenant for communications, even though reading it might double the time of this particular meeting. We do this every meeting for good practice, building up our congregational muscles.

Holding norms and promises and accountability (which is much gentler and easier language for the same kind of thing James is getting at) is necessary, even when it is uncomfortable, so we practice it on easy days. So that when the moments are hard, we have language, we have protocols, we have expectations, we know how to practice love and compassion and grace. We can work for the greater good together.

Are any among you suffering? If so, you are not alone. And being not alone is in itself healing.

I have told you about my beloved community of practice. And when the conference called me to say ‘Reebee, would you facilitate a New Clergy Group?’, you can imagine my response. I know first hand how important it is to be in community, how important it is not to be alone in life or in ministry, that I said yes. And from my “newbies” I learn, and I give thanks - because we are never alone.

Amen.

Covenant for Communications, Pilgrim Church

In this meeting, we will seek the Spirit's wisdom as we reflect on, and make decisions about, the ministry of Pilgrim Church.

We will

- Look for joy, reinforce our strengths, and recognize the accomplishments of this community
- Listen with care in order to understand
- Practice loving communication
- Work to be transparent, clear, and concise in our words
- Try to walk in one another's shoes
- Pause, breathe, and pray if a moment feels challenging
- Look and listen for God in each other
- Assume good intentions
- Collaborate together to bless our neighbors and community
- And be open to constructive feedback offered for the common good.