

Confess to One Another
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
November 14, 2021- AM Service
Reverend Peter Jonker
James 5:13-16

So when I planned this ‘one another’ sermon series, I chose this Sunday to talk about confessing to one another. I chose James 5:16 as our text because that’s where the Bible calls us to confess to one another. But as I started to dig into the passage this week, I started to feel pushed in a slightly different direction. As I read, you will hear verse 16 call us to confess to one another. But as you listen to the whole passage, is confession the main point of the passage, or is James pointing to something else?

So is this a passage about confession? Certainly the call to confess to one another is in the passage, but is that what it’s about? I don’t think so. What is the central issue of this passage? I think it’s prayer. This passage is a call to pray for one another. Mutual confession is one way we pray for one another, but praying for one another is the bigger category. And that’s what I want to talk about this morning.

That means I’m not going to spend much time talking about the elephant in this text. That’s the part of the passage where James seems to guarantee miraculous healing. James says, ‘bring the sick person to the elders and anoint them with oil, the Lord will raise them up.’ I will make a couple of observations about this hard saying: First, I have been involved in this kind of ministry. I have seen several incidents where a sick person was prayed over by the elders and anointed with oil. In one of those cases there was a result that could be described as miraculous. In another instance, the anointed sick person still died. I report this to you just to give you a sense how mysterious and complicated this text is. Second, I would also point out that James’ promise is that the sick person will be raised up. The word ‘raised up’ is the same verb Jesus uses when he tells the disciples that the son of man will be crucified by sinful men, but raised up in the third day. You see, we will all be healed. We will all be cured of our diseases. Some of us will experience that through miraculous healing on this side of the grave. All of us will experience that healing on the other side of the grave, at our resurrection.

So I owe you a sermon on that question, but this morning I want to focus on a different question that jumped out at me. And that’s this. Why does James want to involve the elders in our prayers for healing? God is the healer. Why doesn’t he tell us to bring our healing prayers directly to him? Why get a middle man involved? Why call the elders? Why bring in the oil? Why all the rigmarole? Does God need that stuff?

The same question could be raised about James’ call to confess to one another. Why can’t we just confess to God? Why do I need to confess to another person as well? Obviously we should confess to a person we sin against, but I don’t think James is calling us to confess to people we hurt. James is calling us to confess our sins in general to each other, to let others in the church community know about our struggles with temptation and sin. Why do I need to do that? If I’m struggling with anger or lust, why can’t I just confess my sins to God. Why do I have to involve church members? What business is it of theirs!?

The answer to that question is, ‘one another.’ Prayer is not just a tool for asking God for things, part of prayer’s purpose is to draw us together in community. God wants me to let you know my stuff, he wants you to let me know your stuff, and he wants us to pray about those things together because that makes us a community. In our passage James specifically calls the

church to both vertical AND horizontal prayers. In verse 13 he tells us to bring our troubles and our happiness to God, but then in verses 14-16 he's telling us to be horizontal with our needs, to bring them to each other. God wants us to be naked before him with our joys and sorrows, and he wants us to be naked before each other with those joys and sorrows.

I use that word naked on purpose, because when God calls for that horizontal dimension, he's reversing what happened in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve rebel against God. They try to become like God. They eat the fruit so that they can gain knowledge and power. What happens? They realize that they are naked, they are ashamed, and so they hide. They sense their own weakness and brokenness and inadequacy and they want to cover it up. That's shame, right? If you saw my failure and weakness, you would not accept me, so I hide it. We move away from one another.

What are the two parts of our life that are most likely to be sources of shame? What are the parts of us that we are most likely to hide? Our sins. If people really knew the things I've done...if people knew the temptations I struggle with, they would turn their back. And our weaknesses. If we have some sort of physical blemish, or physical defect, we go through great lengths to cover it up. We don't want to appear dependent. Some people have suggested that I might need hearing aids. I'm reluctant. Guess why? Because I don't want to look dependent. I want to look strong and competent. Sin and weakness are our great source of shame. They are the things we hide.

Now, what are the two things James wants us to open up to each other in prayer? Our sin and weakness! "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for each other." Don't cover these things, reveal them. Be naked about your need. In the fall shame caused us to cover up our nakedness, and community broke down. Now James is calling us to share our sin and weakness with one another so that our sins can be forgiven, our weaknesses can be healed, and community can be restored. In our communal prayer, the Holy Spirit is reversing the damage of the fall.

This is a really important part of prayer that we don't usually think about! We often hear that prayer is powerful because it strengthens our relationship with God. That's so true. We often hear that prayer is powerful because God answers prayer. That's so central. We often hear that prayer is important because it's a way of casting our burdens upon the Lord, off-loading our troubles. That's so right. But we rarely hear about prayer as a creator of community. We rarely hear how the Spirit uses the tool of community prayer to bring us together.

This is real. We started livestreaming our services before the pandemic. We started because we wanted to reach members who were travelling and members who were homebound. Right from the beginning people appreciated the livestream, but one of the reasons for the appreciation surprised me. The homebound members loved being reconnected with the pastoral prayer. They loved hearing people prayed for by name. They loved praying together with the congregation for the needs of others. In the prayer, they felt the Spirit drawing them into community.

Something similar happened during the service last Sunday night. Last Sunday night was the remembrance service, a service where we name all the members of our church family who died within the last year and commit them into the arms of Jesus. This year we also invited congregation members to write down the names of any other people in their life whose loss still caused them grief. We collected the names up front, and Kristy and I read the names of all those dearly-loved people out loud. There were so many names! So many people whose loss still hurts. When we finished reading the names I had an overwhelming sense of shared loss. For me, sharing and confessing that loss to each other, and then lifting it up to Jesus created a strong

sense of community. Every time we share our vulnerabilities and do it before the face of Jesus, the Spirit puts another stitch in the fabric of community.

So James promises that something holy happens when we bring each other our needs and ask for prayer. Does that mean I should announce all my sins and all my problems before the entire congregation? No. When James calls us to confess our sins to one another, he's not calling us to let everyone know about our struggle with porn. When James calls us to bring our sickness to the body, that doesn't mean it's a sin if you don't put your surgery in the bulletin. But James is saying, someone in the community should know. Someone should be praying for you. Someone should be checking up on you. Someone should be sharing your burden. Even Jesus needed someone to pray for him. Remember in the garden, he said to Peter James and John, 'please stay up and pray with me. I need your prayers because my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death!' He didn't ask all the disciples. He only shared that with a smaller subset, but even Jesus was open about his vulnerabilities before his brothers. The Christian life is not a free solo climb up the mountain of righteousness. It's a team effort in which we are lifted up together by the grace of God.

Pay just a little attention and you can see that the world is full of people longing for a safe place to confess their sins and share their vulnerabilities. There was an article in the Boston Globe three weeks ago that remarked on the shortage of therapists in our society. Therapists are so busy they have no room to take on new clients. So you have all these folks out there struggling with stuff in their life but they can't find anyone to talk to. Part of the problem here is the breakdown of community in institutions like family and the church. If your family was intact and close and functioning, if you've cultivated close relationships at your church, when troubles come, you always have a place to go to share those things. You have people who are willing to listen to you and pray for you. If you've lost your deep connections at church and in the family, therapists are your only option. You have to pay someone to listen to you. People are longing for places to share their pain.

People are also longing for places to confess. I listen to a lot of music and a band I've always liked is Radiohead. If you go on streaming services and you go to the page of a musical artist, they will list the artist's most popular songs. If you go to Radiohead's page on Spotify or Amazon Music, their most popular song is a song called 'Creep.' People love this song. I read this week it's been streamed more than a billion times. It's almost 30 years old and it still gets lots of play. Here's a sample of the lyrics... "I wanna have control. I want a perfect body. I want a perfect soul. I wish I was special...But I'm a creep. I'm a weirdo. What the heck am I doin' here? I don't belong here." That last few lines are the chorus. They're repeated multiple times in the song. "I'm a creep! I'm a weirdo." Over and over. Why is this song so popular? Because people long to confess their shame. They may claim to be relativists. They may be the kind of person who would deny that sin is even a thing, but deep in their heart, they know something is not right. They can feel the damage in their soul. And so they get in their cars and turn up their radios, and while Thom York sings "I'm a Creep, I'm a weirdo, I don't belong here," they sing along with tears running down their faces.

This call to confess to one another and share each other's wounds and burdens is not some attempt to meddle in people's lives, it is an offer of the hope of the Gospel. It's an invitation to enter into the Spirit's work. It's an invitation to take our sins and miseries and walk together to meet Jesus at the cross. And at the cross Jesus will not leave you naked. For your weakness he will give you the clothes of his resurrection life. For your sins he will clothe you in his righteousness. And you will be changed.

Ministers are not therapists, but we do spend a lot of time with people who struggle with things in their life. When I started out in ministry, I thought the key to these meetings was figuring out the other person's problem and then giving them really good advice. The key to a good pastoral meeting was wise pastoral counsel. I don't think that anymore. I still think wise counsel matters and I try to give it, but the most important part of these meetings is simply hearing the other person's confession, hearing their pain, and then praying together. Lifting it up to Jesus together. Putting the pain in the arms of the Spirit together and letting the Spirit clothe us with the hope of Jesus. "Therefore my dear brothers and sisters, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other that you may be healed." © Rev. Peter Jonker