

In the last 18 months or so, the world has been traumatized by a ruthless pandemic COVID-19. This pandemic knew no boundaries. Regardless of their political or religious affiliation, all classes of society were infected, and million unfortunately died. I have personally prayed to God to put a hedge of protection around my family both in the United States and in Nagaland. And upon people, I am so privileged to serve as their pastor. Nonetheless, many died in the congregations I served. And the saddest part of it all; we could not give them memorial services.

Just about three weeks ago, a lady from the neighborhood called. She was a bit distraught. She told me, “My son lives in Phoenix, Arizona. He does not believe in COVID-19 and would not vaccinate. He is 49, and now he has COVID-19 and is in ICU. Would you please pray for him?” And I did right then and there on the phone. Two weeks later, she came to worship and told me, “Pastor, my son died within 9 days.” I was devastated by the news as well. Helene and I put our arms around her and prayed.

Friends, I confess to you as a pastor. When I have prayed for someone, I have this fearful ego—maybe the family will report to me that my son got out of the hospital bed walking and leaping and praising God just like the crippled man from birth in Acts 3 who sat at the Beautiful Gate. If you remember, Peter said to him, “I don’t have any money, but in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise and walk.” I am always hopeful when I pray. My pastoral and Christian responsibility is to intercede to knock at heaven’s door for the sick or any other request I get! And let God respond appropriately.

So, during this pandemic, I have been asked, “Pastor, why God heals some but not all?” And I said, “I wish I had a perfect answer. And if I do, you have to worship me as well!” But if I had the healing gift like Apostle Peter, I would be everywhere!

With all honesty, I truly believe God does answer our prayer. But his ways are sometimes not as same as our expectations. Yes, sometimes the outcomes are very puzzling because we are simply human, and we want our ways.

However, in our passage James, the brother of Jesus and Bishop of Jerusalem, is encouraging early Christians in diaspora, people who went everywhere from

Jerusalem. He was writing to them because they have been traumatized in foreign land mixed up with unknown cultural and religious practices. They had become lax in their faith. And so, James reminds them to pray, have a little talk with Jesus every day—a kind of encouragement. And so, he says:

¹³ Is anyone among you **suffering**? Let him pray. Is anyone **cheerful**? Let him sing psalms. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you **sick**? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

Late Scottish New Testament scholar, William Barclay wrote these words I quote: “Church inherited this tradition from Judaism. When a Jew was ill, it was to the Rabbi he went rather than to the doctor, and the Rabbi anointed him with oil—which Galen the Greek Doctor called, “the best of all medicines,” and prayed over him. One of the earliest books concerning church administration is the “*Canons of Hippolytus*,” which goes back to the end of the second century or the beginning of the third century. It is there laid down that men who have the gift of healing are to be ordained as presbyters when the investigation has been made to ensure that they really do possess the gift and that it comes from God. That same book gives the noble prayer used at the consecration of the local bishops, and part of that prayer runs, “Grant unto him, O Lord...the power to break all the chains of the evil power of the demons, to cure all the sick and speedily to subdue Satan beneath his feet.” ¹

As you can see, early Christians understood that the Church was a healing place. It is no wonder even today, we instinctively resonant to pray to God because we know God is our shelter in times of storm. God is our solid rock on which we stand! (UMCH#368). Psalmist said, “God is our refuge and strength” (Ps 46).

The early church was right because 2/3 of the four Gospels is about healing. There are a total of 22 healings ministries of Jesus. Is the Gospel Jesus telling us that healing is very important? I would unequivocally say healing is in our DNA as followers of Jesus Christ. And so, we must not shy away from praying for healing; it is God’s business. Even today, James says, “Make your faith work because faith without work is dead” (James 2:26). So, exercise your faith and approach God boldly.

To me, this is spiritual wisdom. And it is not blind faith but faith that is trusting in God’s possibility. Here is a quote from James Boyce: “Wisdom does not look at the world through rose-colored glasses. His vision is clear and honest in its

¹ Barclay: The Letters of James and Peter page153

recognition that life contains many ups and downs and often complex situations that we cannot always control.” And so, James writes, ‘Is anyone among you **suffering**? Let him pray. Is anyone **cheerful**? Let him sing psalms. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you **sick**? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.’ Prayer is a critical link to God.

The first Greek word for suffering is **pathos** of one who is doing “badly,” (**kakos**) refers not only to the “suffering” of persecution but to anything that can contribute to a negative life experience, such as sorrow, depression, ill-health, bad family or social situation, economic exigencies. Use your imagination. James says, you just have to pray!

The second word in Greek is **thymos**, meaning cheerfulness/spiritedness about inner self or passion. So, an inner self that is doing well (**eu**) has to do more with a holistic sense of the self rather than just being “cheerful.” If you feel whole, be cheerful. Be joyful.

The third word in Greek is **astheneo**, meaning sick—more like being weak,² any kind of sickness or bodily infirmity, either short or long term. It pretty much includes anyone we might have. We might imagine including ourselves in any situations. And for any situation, wisdom suggests a practice that is fitting to the occasion.³ Call the elder of the church and pray and anoint the weak with oil. And God will do the rest!

James is not exhorting Christians to avoid physicians and nurses or hospitals. We know that they have an enormous role to play to bring us to cure our suffering. During this pandemic, we witnessed how hard and tirelessly they have worked and even now put their lives for our safety. Imagine how quickly varieties of vaccines came about to inoculate us! Maybe, James is saying that not all sicknesses in life require vaccine or surgery or drugs but spiritual wellness. Maybe God-centeredness. We need to find your place for wholeness!

Dr. Gay Byron, professor at Howard University, wrote these words: “We live in a world where suffering abounds. From the lingering impacts of COVID-19 to ongoing wars and forced displacement of children and families to devastating wildfires, earthquakes, and hurricanes, people from across the U.S. and throughout

² Zondervan vol 4, page 116

³ James Boyce: Working Preacher

the world are experiencing suffering like never before. So as the reader comes to the end of the letter of James, a letter filled with ethical teachings and moral admonitions, it is encouraging to find these timely teachings about prayer.”⁴ And, of course, we are spiritual beings, and prayer is not about scapegoating. But it is about exercising our language of faith.

In the land where I grew up, my late mother was a member of a visitation team. They visited the sick in the community for prayer for God’s healing to come. Sometimes, God’s healing came in the form of death. And Church was still there ready to welcome the departed with the singing of hymns and prayerfully ushering the soul of the departed to heaven’s gate.

When we intercede, we come to stand between God and the person. We don’t command God what to do; we simply pray in the tradition of Jesus, who prayed, ‘Father, take this cup from me.’ I don’t like it but not my will but yours. Healing comes from God in the form only God understands; one day, God will explain to us why but for now, we say, “Thy will be done as it is heaven.”

When my girls were little and had belly aches, they would run to daddy for prayer, for the pain to go away! I would put my hand on them and say, “**Anepang Amen**” in my Ao tribal language, meaning, “Be healed. Amen.” Later, they would come around and say, “Daddy, it is gone.” When they were in college and not doing well, they called and asked for prayer. And I said, on the phone, “**Anepang Amen.**” That is all they want to hear from daddy. Be healed because “God said I am the Lord that health thee” (Ex 15:26). Now, hear God saying to you, “Be healed. Amen.”

⁴ Gay Byron: Working Preacher