

September 31-October 1, 2006

“Gathered for Prayer”

James 5:13-20

Pr. Tom Schoenherr

“It’s me, it’s me, it’s me, O Lord,
Standin’ in the need of prayer.
It’s me, it’s me, it’s me, O Lord,
Standin’ in the need of prayer”

On September 11, 2001, that terrible day, we all watched the twin towers of the World Trade Center imploding and collapsing in an unbelievable cloud of life-choking dust, as people frantically fled to escape the horrible scene. One church in New York City put out a large sign in front, “Open for Prayer.” Everybody seemed to need to pray that day. Our church was open for prayer. We had a service at noon and in the evening.

When we come together for worship, we come as people who are suffering, cheerful, sick, lonely, depressed, fearful, sad, happy, etc. We bring all of our needs to God. We are gathered for prayer, and we are connected to God and to one another through prayer, Word and the Holy Communion. In prayer we hold on to God and God holds on to us. We seek His ways and will, and we listen for His presence.

There is an old story that has been told with a variety of settings, but it is still the same story about prayer. A grizzly middle age man in Alaska is telling a bartender how he recently lost whatever faith in God he had after his twin-engine plane lost power, and he had to land it in the forsaken tundra. “Yeah,” he says bitterly, “I lay there in the wreckage, hour after hour, nearly frozen to death, crying out for God to save me, praying for help with every ounce of my being, but God didn’t lift a finger. So I’m done with God and faith and prayer, and the whole charade.”

“But,” said the bartender, “you’re here. You were saved.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” says the man, “because finally some old Eskimo came along...”

As we gather for prayer, we raise to God the people who are living in the wreckage, who are suffering, sick or hurting in some way. God sends us to them as part of the answer to prayer. Or we, who are hurting, have people come into our lives whom God has sent as part of His answer to our prayer. Sometimes we miss these people as being sent by God to us.

My wife is experiencing that all the time. Before her surgery, in the hospital, and now recovering at home, she receives cards and food and phone calls from many of you. These are ways in which God receives the offering of prayer, and includes us as being part of the answer to healing and care that comes from God. Barb and many others have told me that through the prayers of the community, they can feel God lifting them up to let them know they are not alone.

Anne Lamott tells the story of a couple whose one daughter has cystic fibrosis. They need to pound on her back for 45 minutes to loosen the sludge in the lungs that harbors infection. Two week hospital stays are common. The community of friends and family gathers around them for prayer. They cook meals, walk the dog, take the parents out for lunch, clean the kitchen, listen to them, cry with them.

It may be that the diagnosis of disease, or divorce, or death covers us like a heavy, wet blanket, weighing us down. People come around and through prayer, each one takes an edge of the blanket in their hands and together, as we lift to Jesus the needs of people, the blanket that weighs them down is lifted for a while, and there is hope and an answer to prayer.

It isn't that we believe in prayer, or the power of prayer, or that more people praying makes a difference. That would place our faith more in numbers of people, or in ourselves. Jesus Christ is the One in whose name we pray. He is the power of prayer. We believe in Christ who suffers, dies and rises again for us. He is the One who saves and heals us for now and for eternity.

We pray because God wants us to and He has promised to listen and to answer. Our congregation gathers for prayer in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who heals us and calls us to intercede for all people.

At the Lord's Table we receive Jesus Christ in bread and wine and grape juice; the Body and Blood of Christ. There we also become part of the answer to prayer for many others, as we are sent as the Body of Christ to those who are suffering, sick, cheerful, wandering and confused, enemies, discouraged, fearful, lonely, and depressed. Jesus connects us to all people through the Meal.

There is power in prayer, but it is the power of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. When we can't pray ourselves, when we just don't have the words or even the faith, the people gathered in prayer, the congregation or the community of faith, prays for us. And not just them, but the angels in heaven and the Holy Spirit come to God on our behalf. The heavy blanket that weighs us down is lifted for a while, and we have hope, and healing and new life. Good Shepherd is Open for Prayer.

It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord
Standin' in the need of prayer.
It's me it's me, it's me, O Lord,
Standin' in the need of prayer.

In Jesus' name, Amen.