

Essential Oil For the Soul
James 5:13-20

A number of years ago my mother started really getting into something called essential oils. Are you familiar with this phenomenon? Given my very limited exposure, as far as I can tell, this is a cult of some kind, whose members display an evangelical zeal and intensity that puts fundamentalist street-preachers to shame. If you or someone you know are a member of this essential oils clan, then you're familiar with this conversation:

One person will say, "I'm afraid I'm getting a sore throat."

And the other person responds, "Oh, well have you ever tried essential oils? You should try some Tea Tree oil. Actually, here, I have some here in my purse." And before you know it this person is forcibly tracing their oily fingers over your face.

You can say, "My skin has just been really dry ever since the weather changed." "Work is really stressing me out this week." Or "I seem to have misplaced my car keys." The answer is always the same: There's an essential oil for that.

James, in our reading from today, sounds a bit like these essential oil evangelists. He has a one-size-fits-all solution to all your ailments. For James, it is prayer. Prayer is James's essential oil for the soul. "Are any of you suffering? Oh, well, have you ever tried prayer? Are you cheerful? There's a prayer for that! Are you sick? You should really try prayer; here I have one right here in my purse. Do you have any friends who are struggling? Definitely pray." James even goes so far as to imply that we can control the weather. He tells us that Elijah used prayer to keep the rain at bay for three and a half years. And how did Elijah get it to start raining again, you ask? That's right. He prayed for it.

I wonder if, in a weak moment, you have ever wanted to punch someone like James in the face. Of course, prayer is good and it's not that we don't always welcome it, but doesn't your life experience suggest that prayer and healing and rain and drought are not quite as straightforward as James makes it out to be? Isn't life—and certainly prayer—more complicated than that?

So let's talk about prayer; specifically about this kind of prayer that James has in mind: intercessory prayer. Asking God for stuff.

Intercessory prayer is obviously good. Jesus actually tells us to do it: "Ask, and it will be given to you, search, and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you." This is the foundation of intercessory prayer. That this practice exists is a miracle; that the God and Creator of the Universe wants to know what and who is on your—yes, your—heart. And when someone is petitioning God on your behalf, it is often profoundly encouraging. It is a vehicle through which we can share our burdens, and in so doing make them lighter to carry.

But just because it is obviously good does not mean it's always obviously straightforward or easy. Praying for other people can be bewildering and confusing. It can be intimidating, even. There's a huge power differential, for one. And it's not always as easy as Susan is sick and wants to not be sick anymore. Sometimes people are in pain but the solution is not at all obvious. We very often—I very often—don't entirely know what to say. And we can feel insecure—who am I to be asking God for arthritis to go away when people are starving and dying out there?

If you have ever felt any of this, I have a suggestion. Not the definitive solution for all your prayer problems. There are lots of good ways to pray. I think this is one answer, and I offer it up to you in hopes that it will be helpful as it has been to me. As is often the case in mystery novels, the answer that I'd like to share has been lurking the whole time right under our nose. And that answer is this: the collects.

I'm sure that most of you already know this, but in case you don't, The Book of Common Prayer has a different prayer—called a collect—assigned for every week of the church year, and then a handful of others to be used on particular occasions. They are called collects because, as one person put it, they literally *collect* all of our "disparate and disjointed hopes and fears" and "render them into phrases with which we can learn the habit of addressing God."¹ The safekeeping and cultivation of the collects, which have been around for over a millennia, might be Anglicanism's greatest contribution to the universal church.

My suggestion is not that in order to pray better, you just need to read the collects. Nor is it that to pray rightly means to pray in effortlessly elegant prose as the collects do. I don't even mean you have to use your Prayer Book. What I want to suggest is that we can learn a lot about intercessory prayer from the *pattern* that the collects take. I want to say three things.

Number one: Start by saying something about God. Don't rush straight to your petition. If you start reading through the collects, you'll notice that every single one starts by saying something about God—listing some characteristic or action—before it gets to asking God for anything. Our collect for this week, for example, starts by saying, "O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity." Others start more simply with "Almighty God" or "Gracious God."

The reason to start our prayers this way is not because when asking God for things, it's important to be polite. What starting our prayers this way does, for one, is that it helps us remember that we are praying to a particular God who has a distinct character and who has already acted in our history. It's a discipline of memory—a way of acknowledging that God is not a black and unknowable void of mystery that you shoot your prayers into; that this is God who has revealed himself in Jesus such that you can actually confidently list some of his attributes.

But what's more—and probably more importantly—it helps us know what to ask God for. If we start by looking back at how God has acted in the past, we can have a better sense for how God might act now and in the future. We are establishing the reason we believe God will hear, understand, and respond to our petition. If we were to again use this week's collect as an example, after saying, "O God you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity," it would not make sense to continue by saying, "therefore please give me big muscles and please may my football team win today." What's something God loves to do? If you can't think of anything, just think of the life of Jesus. Ask God to do for you or those you love what you know God has already done for others. It's a means of accountability, but it's also a means of being invited more deeply into relationship with our particular God.

Suggestion number two: Use verbs. Use imperative verbs, actually. Give. Visit. Heal. Reveal. Be present. Teach. Enfold. Defend. Inspire. The collects use imperative verbs. They are not vague.

This requires some thought about what it might actually look like for God to answer this prayer. It's not at all clear what it might look like for God to answer the prayer, for example, "We pray for Sarah." When trying to

¹ Sam Wells, *Shaping The Prayers of The People*, 13.

come up with verbs, again, think of the ways in which you see God acting in Scripture. One smart person I know suggests that our petitions fall into three categories: resurrection, transfiguration, and incarnation.²

Resurrection verbs are those that ask God to do a miracle. To act definitely and surprisingly. The best and most obvious example of this is prayers for healing. But I think it also includes prayers to strengthen and give hope to the poor, to defend the oppressed and those under attack, prayers against natural disasters or prayers for conversion.

Transfiguration verbs are for contexts in which the desired outcome is not as straightforward as healing—for situations that are slightly more complex, yet for that very reason we desire to pray for them. In the transfiguration, Jesus shines, inspires, teaches, and gives hope. He remembers and reveals. Today's collect would fall under this category: "Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure." Transfiguration prayers hold something up before God and ask him to shine through it.

Incarnation verbs are for when we're at a loss for words, but are desperate for God to do something—it's just hard for us to know what. There is one main imperative for incarnation prayers: to be; asking God to be present. The incarnation represents God's presence with us. There is no circumstance in which it is inappropriate to ask God to be with you or to be with those you love.

Number three: The ending matters. You will no doubt have noticed that most of our prayers in the prayer book end with a variety of very formulaic sounding phrases. Today's is a perfect example: "through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen." This isn't just because Episcopalians love fancy vocabulary—though we totally do. These formulas are doing something; they're locating this particular prayer—this particular petition—within the life of the Trinity. It is, in other words, showing you how your prayers get to God. And this matters because it is showing you that the God you pray to is not a slot machine in the sky or a greying CEO scrolling through the world's most biggest and depressing email inbox.

Each member of the Trinity has a different role in prayer. The classic Christian language is to say that we pray *to* the Father, *through* the Son, and *in* or *by* the Spirit. What this means is that prayer is primarily a conversation between the Father and Son, which by the Spirit believers are invited to become a part. Jesus, having taken on human form in the incarnation, can't be everywhere at once. He can only be in one place, and that is at the right hand of the Father. Yet Christ is made present to us by the Holy Spirit, who can be many places at once. So this is how prayer works: The Spirit is here, hovering, and the Spirit carries your prayer up to the Son, and the Son petitions the Father. Your prayer is spoken in the voice of Jesus to the Father.

What that shape helps us understand—that shape of the Spirit carrying our prayers up to God—is this: when you are praying, you are with God. You are sitting at the table with God. You are in the holy of holies. You are participating in the eternal, mysterious dance of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

You may have people in your life that are quote unquote good at prayer. I don't suppose that means they have a good batting average; that they don't boast a better success rate for answering prayers than others. What I take that to mean is that people "good at prayer" have been relatively successful in doing so often. I also don't suspect that what sustains them in their discipline is the frequency with which their prayers are answered; I

² Wells, 27.

suspect what sustains them is that they have learned that in praying—whether those prayers are answered now or later—they are spending time with God.

Heaven describes a place where all wrongs have been put right and we get to be with God and with one another forever. But once all wrongs have been put right, all that's left is being with God and being with one another forever. Which is to say, you are experiencing a little slice of eternal paradise when you pray.

If you want a more specific image to keep in your mind while you are praying, consider Jesus on the cross. Because when stripped down to its core, every intercessory prayer is at its heart a prayer for salvation. Every prayer for healing is a prayer for the salvation of our whole soul and body. Every prayer for our country, our community, or our friends is at its most deepest level a longing for God to save. Prayer is about salvation. Every petition of resurrection, transfiguration, and incarnation is answered in salvation. And salvation is what was won for us on the cross. Jesus on the cross is listening to your prayers. Which also means that our God has suffered with you. God doesn't live in a grand control box in the sky deciding whether or not to press the cancer button or the not cancer button. God is on the cross. Jesus is God suffering with us. That's the one who is petitioning the Father on our behalf. The one who died for us. Every prayer is an invitation for you to come into the heart of God.

Amen.