



## Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

Anyone Can Pray  
September 27, 2009  
The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost  
James 5:13-20

13 Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

One summer I interned as a chaplain at a downtown hospital. On overnights, you had a chaplain's room on the 5th floor that had a bed and a black and white television. After making the rounds, up to the room to sleep with the beeper by your head.

One Friday night I was sitting on the bed watching TV when the beeper rang. 777 – Emergency room. I went right down. I met the nurse who said they had a teenage girl. She has attempted suicide. Swallowed a bunch of pills. She needs to drink the shake soon. And we can't reach her parents. They are out.

The shake looks like a carbon milkshake...because that is what it is. Black, thick and tastes like coal. You drink it and it coats the stomach and intestines, preventing anything from being absorbed. Then the drugs can pass harmlessly through the body.

But you have to drink the shake. Or they will force it down your throat.

The Chaplain's job is to try the first way.

I stepped in. Her name was Sam. She was pretty, well dressed, in the right fashion, sitting with her friend. Sam would not drink it. It was gross. Her friend was upset, hyper. She had to go over and give some more information to the police. I stood at Sam's bedside.

The friend went out.

Sam burst into tears. It all came out. Her parents were always out. Her dad always at work. Her mom always nagging. And her friend had told her about what her boyfriend did...and with whom. How could she trust anyone, if she can't even trust her friends?

How could she trust anyone?

Then the doctor stepped in. She said in no uncertain terms that she would be back in five minutes and if that shake wasn't gone they would tie Sam down and force the shake down.

Sam and I were both startled by the doctor's abrupt and forceful tone. Then I remembered the car accident earlier in the evening, the father who died mowing the lawn at the warehouse, and the older couple with the chest pain and nasty tone. And I realized the doctor was hoping the threat would go well with the pastor compassion.

Sam didn't want to drink. She cried. How come I can't trust anybody? What's wrong with me?

How come I'm so alone?

13-15 Are you hurting? Pray.

Do you feel great? Sing.

Are you sick? Call the church leaders together to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Master.

Sam may not have responded well to "Let's pray." But maybe. We did pray later, after the milkshake. Sam was hurting. James thinks she should pray. How often do we offer prayer to those who are hurting? How often do we pray when we are hurting?

Let's go off the rhetorical page for a moment. Silently, in your head, when did you last pray. For what? Do you remember why you prayed? Were you alone? Or was it here with confession, but before that? Was it last Sunday? Or at dinner? Or when you were late for the game and hoping for cheap parking?

Do we pray for our families? Do we pray for the sick? Do we pray thanksgivings for the many blessings: of children in the church hallways, of the smell of autumn, of our good health, of the roof over our head, of the blessing of a church where we are loved and valued.

Do we pray for Sam? I bet we do.

We pray when we are hurting. And at the moment we are obeying the word of the Lord, thanks be to God. James says, pray when you hurt. Or as the NRSV says, pray when you are in trouble: during calculus, when you're waiting in your boss's outer office and the secretary is trying not to make eye contact; when the answering machine has the nurse saying the test results are in, can you make an appointment.

When you're sitting at home and realize it has been two weeks since your son called. And you decide you won't just call him. The games we still play even when we should know better.

When you are hurting, Pray.

Pray.

We do better with the second part, don't we? Do you feel great? Sing. We do that. We find someone to celebrate with. We high five, chest butt, give each other a "Way to go" and "That's just awesome." We smile, we laugh, we stretch, self-satisfied. We sing. We walk down the hall to the next cube and say "It worked!" "They ordered 1,000 widgeits," "I sold another Cadillac." "They learned." "The test tube series looks good."

When things are going well we find a friend and celebrate.

When we are hurting we close down. We lock ourselves in our room - alone. We crank Led Zeppelin, System of a Down, Cream. We turn on the TV and try to lose ourselves in it. We go to the refrigerator and try to drown the hurt in double Dutch fudge.

We go sit on our parents' bed. Wondering where they are. Wondering why they are so... We look in their medicine cabinet. We swallow the vicodin from the back spasm and the valium from the long days. We pop the oxycontin from the sprained ankle.

We hurt, but maybe not for long.

Are you sick, call the church leaders? Sometimes prayer is not enough because we are alone. We need each other. "I wanna hold your hand," sing the Beatles. "Call on me and I'll be there," says James Taylor. "Lean on me" "I'll be your friend," sings Bill Withers and the 4 Tops. "Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saves a wretch like me." To just be there for us. Sometimes you need

someone to come see you. Someone who isn't afraid of catching what you got. Someone who cares even if they don't yet know you well. You need Christians to come in and sit with you and be with you in this time...maybe they will have time for me.

For I hurt.

Are you sick, call a Christian. We will be there for you.

I hope I am describing you today. James talks of Elijah, not as a great prophet, but as "human just like us," someone who prays when there is hurt and who prays when the rains come and life starts to grow again. I hope I am describing you. It's not about church professionals, or deacons, or anyone else. It is about you.

You.

Being Jesus to the one who hurts.

You can do this. You already do this for your children. You do this already. Thank you.

Sam cried and wouldn't drink the milkshake. Till I poured some in a cup and drank it first. Then she drank it down, crying, sobbing, black stuff running down her face. My heart breaks for her.

On Saturday morning she was admitted onto another wing. For help.

Tuesday I visited. On Wednesday her parents took her home.

That Friday, I was eating dinner in the hospital when the beeper beeped.

Another teenage girl. 400 Tylenol.

19-20 My dear friends, if you know people who have wandered off from God's truth, don't write them off. Go after them. Get them back and you will have rescued precious lives from destruction and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God.

Go after them. Be Jesus for them.