

September 26, 2021
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost / Proper 21

Meditation: "What ails us"

And God looked upon the myriad forms of life that God had created and said, "It is very good."

Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life, and have it in abundance."

James wrote, "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord." and "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed."

These three pieces of scripture have been floating around in my mind all week long. Life and sickness and healing. What have they to do with one another? Let me ask, show of hands, who here has never been ill, psychologically distressed, spiritually troubled, anxious, or depressed? So, you all know that when we feel unwell we have a tendency to turn in on ourselves and shut others out. In fact, there have been times that I have felt like I would rather die than suffer through a bad flu. There is a sense in which, when we turn in on ourselves, we die. We die to community.

Scholars are divided as to who the true author of James' letter is. It could have been James, the brother of Jesus, but it could just as easily have been someone else writing it on James' behalf, or even another James altogether. Nor do they agree on who the letter is written to. What they do agree on is that the letter is a moral exhortation, and that the part of the letter that we read this morning is about life in community. We were created for community. We need community, and not just when we are sick, or down, or in a rough patch. We need community when we are well, up, and when life is going well for us. We need to be with those who are ill, to pray with them, to care for them, and we need to be with those who are celebrating, to pray with them, to rejoice with them. Community is paramount, and it ought not be a surprise, for God is community, a trinity, and God created Creation to have something other than Godself to be in community with.

Everything I have said about individuals is also true for congregations. When we turn in on ourselves, we turn our backs on community. When that happens, we become ambivalent about the community and, in turn, the community ceases to see us as relevant. And so, we die, spiritually, if not in actuality. When we are reminded of God's grace, when we remember our blessings, when we are healed from the anxiety, the depression, the spiritual and psychological distress that we may feel; when we are healed and feel secure within ourselves once more, we are able to turn our focus outward, we are able to turn our focus to the greater community in which we live and move and have our being.

Speaking of the greater community, I just don't understand what is happening to the country I grew up in. In the country I grew up in, we didn't paint swastikas on political lawn signs, or throw gravel at the Prime Minister, or berate health care providers because we don't agree with mask mandates or vaccine passports. What happened to respect for others and their property? When I was watching the news the other night there was a story about an ICU doctor who was called a killer by a covid patient whose life they had just saved. The patient accused the doctors of infecting people in order to kill them. This didn't happen in Alabama, it happened in Alberta. What happened to a sense of social responsibility or of gratitude? And where is all of this anger coming from?

When we are ill, James advises we call the community to our aid, to pray over us, to anoint us. We don't anoint someone just to use up the old olive oil that's been hanging around in the pantry and is past its best before date. We do it for a reason. Yes, to anoint someone is to treat them with a medicinal oil or ointment, but it is more than just that. Anointing is both treatment for illness and a reminder of God's grace.

I wonder, is there something here that would explain the anger in our society? Could it be that we have forgotten God? Could it be we have made ourselves into gods? Could the source of our anger, disrespect and lack of social conscience and responsibility be coming from our sense of entitlement? We seem to feel entitled to do what WE want, when we want to, how we want to, without consideration of how that may affect others or the environment. And God help the poor soul that gets in our way.

But not everyone that is anointed is cured, you might argue. True, they may not be cured, but the hope is that they are healed. Curing puts an end to something, and there are things like fourth stage pancreatic cancer that are only brought to an end by death, but that doesn't mean that healing can't happen. Healing is about more than curing. It is about making someone whole again. It is about more than just the flesh. It is about the spirit. The purpose of healing, and curing if that happens, is so that we can turn outward once more, and return to life in community.

We may not, as individuals, need anointing at this very moment, but our society certainly does. Not because it needs to be cured, but because it needs to be healed. We need to learn or relearn respect for one another, even when we may disagree. We need to learn or relearn a sense of social conscience and responsibility; that we are not an island unto ourselves. Mostly, we need to learn or relearn that we have all been blessed with the gift of life, that we are all mortal, that life can be unfair and cruel at times, and that God loves us in both the good times and in the most difficult of times. We are never alone. God is with us. Thanks be to God.