

September 26, Ordinary 26B (James 5:13-20)

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by [Nanette Sawyer](#) in the [September 8, 2021](#) issue

“The prayer of faith will save the sick.” So much suffering has been created by the application of this verse. Many people have entered grief with fear and guilt in their hearts—that their faith was not strong enough to save their loved one from death. This scripture is meant to be encouraging. And yet it is so human of us to turn it against ourselves, or against those around us, when prayers don’t create the outcome for which we long.

I regularly pray for things that are unlikely to come about quickly, if at all. I pray for world peace. I pray for just resolutions to major geopolitical situations. I pray for reduced gun violence and for equity and fairness between all people. I pray for an end to fake news and for increased understanding between me and my extended family about social issues. I pray that my loved ones will not die.

I don’t pray these things because I expect a miracle like Elijah’s, when it seemed his prayer impacted the clouds and rain. After all, even though the author of James lifts up Elijah as a model, the letter also reminds people to be patient like the farmers are patient when they wait for rain to come in its own time, with the early and the late rains (5:7-8). The fact that the rains will come is described as a sign that God is near. Even the prophets who spoke in the name of God had patience and showed endurance. There are cycles of existence, and God is with us in them. There is a time for planting and a time for harvesting. There is a time for living and a time for dying. And God is with us, through it all.

The prayers I pray, with heartfelt sincerity for unlikely outcomes, I offer to God with my thoughts, words, and silent reflection in my heart. “Are any among you suffering?” James asks. “They should pray.” I pray about my own fears, my own

emotional and sometimes physical suffering. I pray about the suffering I see around me in the world.

And what do these prayers do? They remind me that I am not alone, that I am deeply connected to the world, to God's creation, to God's beloved children around the globe. They remind me that God is near. Do my prayers change God? I don't think so. But they do change me, and they change my experience of my relationship to God. These prayers reflect my dependence on God and my interdependence with God's creation. James affirms this kind of prayer when the author writes, "Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you" (4:8).

But this kind of personal prayer is not enough. James is a call to faithful works, and in this week's portion the letter offers a reminder that communal prayer can heal. It is one of the ways that we live the word, embodying it in our faith lives, praying for and with each other. Our prayers in community have the capacity to change our relationships, but we have to be willing to be vulnerable and honest with each other. Prayers heal individuals and communities if there is honesty and truth telling between us. It's not just an individual who confesses who is healed, it's all of us.

Here's one place where the old-fashioned English of the King James Version preserves the plural *you*. "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." This is not so *thee* (singular) may be healed. James asserts that those who have wandered away from the truth may be brought back from wandering through our prayers of confession and our mutual forgiveness. And in the process, the whole community experiences healing.

Although James writes in dualisms and makes rhetorical either/or arguments, our world is not an either/or world. James writes of prayers for healing—including anointing with oil, prayers of confession and assurance of pardon, and prayers to God which bring about miracles, such as Elijah's prayers for drought and rain. Though Elijah's prayers "worked" on the weather, most farmers have to wait for the rains to come in their own season. Though our prayers effect real change, it's not always the change we wish for.

When our prayers cannot miraculously change the outcome of things—even when we are facing illness, death, violence, or injustice (5:4)—we can continue to be doers of the word (1:22). Yes, that means clothing the naked and feeding the hungry. But it also means continuing our prayers with and for each other, prayers that change

us. Speaking the truth in love, letting our yes be yes and our no be no, we can be sources of healing for sin-sick souls, calling each other to sincere truth telling.

There is no need to judge ourselves or each other for our heartfelt prayers for miracles. No need to feel guilt or shame that our faith is not “strong enough” to avert death or to overcome the dry and harsh seasons of injustice. While we pray, and while we wait for the early and late rains, we can continue to know that God is near, now and always. Tell the truth, pray for one another, forgive one another. Do this and “ye may be healed.”