

## PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER

Psalm 121, OT p. 571  
 James 5:13-20, NT p. 231  
 Mark 9:38-50, NT p. 45

September 27, 2009  
 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
 Marilyn Allen

I stumble from time to time. I can be walking along a sidewalk, and the next thing you know, it will rise up and catch my toe. I was hiking in the Gorge a couple of weeks ago, on the trail above Multnomah Falls. It was rough in places, so I was watching the trail carefully. There's a smooth spot, so I can look at the scenery. There's a rocky place, so I'd better be careful. And there's a larger rock I'll step over – oops! The foot didn't come up quite high enough. Thanks to my hiking stick, I didn't fall, but I could have – more than once. I don't need anyone to put stumbling blocks in my way. I can find them just fine on my own.

The Greek word for “stumbling block” is *skandalizo* – our word “scandal” comes from that root. Jesus meant something more than a rock in the path. He was referring to anything that could cause a loss of faith for anyone, especially for those new to the Way. A lack of welcome, or confusing expectations, or theological disagreements might get in the way of a new believer. Jesus had just told his disciples not to worry about who is greatest, but to welcome the least, including children. Don't worry about someone who heals in my name, he said, just because you don't know him. Remember, we are all servants of God together. Don't do anything that might make someone trip up. No stumbling block, no *skandalizo*.

Our Presbyterian *Book of Order*, in the section on membership, uses the word “scandal” this way:

The congregation shall welcome all persons who respond in trust and obedience to God's grace in Jesus Christ and desire to become part of the membership and ministry of his Church. No persons shall be denied membership because of race, ethnic origin, worldly condition, or any other reason not related to profession of faith. Each member must seek the grace of

openness in extending the fellowship of Christ to all persons. Failure to do so constitutes a rejection of Christ himself and causes a scandal to the gospel.<sup>1</sup>

The stumbling block, as understood by our faith tradition, is not just a problem for the one who stumbles, or a private sin for the one who causes it. The stumbling block, whatever it is, isn't just a problem for the local church or for the church at large. Not to welcome a follower of Jesus is a scandal "to the *gospel*" and a "rejection of *Christ himself*." The Good News of Jesus Christ stumbles when we fail to welcome and include those whom Christ includes.

So instead of stumbling blocks, maybe we could use some building blocks. How can we build up the faith we share? The writer of the book of James was a practical Christian. We haven't read all of the James readings this month, but it's a short book. Try reading it straight through this week. James is clear that we show our faith by what we do and how we speak. Faith is not a private matter between one person and God. According to James, and according to Jesus and Paul and the other early Christians, faith is always formed and expressed within the Christian community. You're well aware of a famous quote from James – "Faith without works is dead." We are meant to express our faith as we live with one

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<sup>1</sup>*The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II: Book of Order, 2007/2009.* Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) G-5.0103

another, in our families, in our community of faith, and in the world at large.

In his concluding words that I read today, James gives some practical advice. He knows that when we come together, we'll bring different life experiences with us. Some of us will be suffering – struggling with a decision, or grieving a loss, or facing opposition because of our faith. “Are any among you suffering? They should pray.” The gospel song, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” expresses that so well. “Oh, what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.” We can do that alone in the middle of the night, but how much better to share our need with a few trusted friends in the family of faith. And so we have our prayer chain, and we share our requests here on Sunday morning, and after choir Wednesday evening, and other times when we gather. As we pray together, we build up one another in faith.

“Are any among you cheerful?” asks the writer. “They should sing songs of praise.” Some of you enjoy listening to Christian radio stations or CDs, with songs of praise and encouragement. I suppose some of you sing in the shower – God hears you there, whether or not anyone else does. We begin Sunday morning worship with at least one song of praise to God. Any time we remember God's blessings is a good time to sing praise. Our faith is strengthened when we give thanks, and especially when we give thanks together.

“Are any among you sick?” James asks. “They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them....” We pray every Sunday for those who are sick. We send out prayer chain requests, and tie prayer quilts. What are we doing when we pray for the sick? What do we expect God to do? I'm sure you remember the church in the Portland area that teaches their members never to go to a doctor, not even when a child is dying. Prayer is enough, they say. I don't know anyone here who takes this so literally that they would only

pray. And yet we don't deny that prayer works – I just don't know why or when or how it might, or why sometimes the opposite of what we pray for seems to happen. Yet we continue to pray.

The Christian church has always been a place of healing. Jesus was a healer of both soul and body. The earliest Christians took his example and teaching seriously. At the end of the first century, there were maybe 5,000-7,000 Christians in Asia Minor, or Turkey. Two hundred years later, Christians were in the majority. Do you know how that happened? One major factor appears to have been the emphasis on healing. There were at least two episodes of some kind of plague in those centuries – probably smallpox. Nearly a third of the population of the Roman Empire died, even the soldiers. At the first sign of plague in a village or city, there were two reactions. If you were rich, you left town for your farm or beach house, and you didn't come back until it was over. If you were poor, you couldn't run away, so when a member of your family got sick, you pulled him or her out into the street to die.

But there was a third choice. If you were one of those few Christians, you did what Jesus had taught. You went out into the street, rescued anyone who seemed to be half alive, and saved them, literally. You gave them water and fed them and kept them warm. And many of them got well. If you had been one of those who had been pulled out of the street by a stranger, what would you do? As you recovered, you might observe their prayers and songs, hear their Scripture and discussions. You would experience their love for one another and for yourself, a stranger. Most likely you would want to become part of this new group. The Christian church grew rapidly during those years because of its ministry of healing.

People were saved physically by the power of God's love at work in the community of

faith, and they were saved spiritually by the same power. When James says, “the Lord will raise them up,” he probably means that both physically and spiritually. The sick will be raised from their beds, and they will be raised to eternal life.

The ministry of healing continues. We don't limit God's power to heal just to our prayers, fervent as they might be. Even the early Christians understood the importance of doing what they could, while they prayed. We have the advantage of incredible medical knowledge and the commitment of researchers to discover more ways to treat and cure and prevent disease. We add the blessings of science to our trust in God. However, we know that there is a limit to science and medicine. None of us will escape death. Sooner or later, we will have to let go of those we love, and entrust them to the mercy of God. We will have to let go of our own life and entrust ourselves to God.

Psalm 121 speaks of that trust, the trust of the faithful on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. “My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.” All of life is a pilgrimage, a journey with God and toward God. We're not alone on this journey, for God has given us a community of fellow pilgrims. When one is suffering, all can pray together. When one is joyful, everyone can sing praise. When someone is sick, the community joins in prayers for healing and wholeness. When a dear friend faces death, the community gathers around in love.

Friends, this is what we are doing. This is how we live our faith as followers of Jesus. May we be generous with our ministries of caring – to members and friends and strangers, for as we welcome those in need, we welcome Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. O God, source of all life and health, give grace to this community of faith. May the love of Christ show in our deeds, his peace shine in our words, and his healing be

known in our touch, that all may give him praise, now and forever. Amen.