

**'A praying community' a sermon based on James 5:13-20 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 26 September 2021 by Kerry Enright.**

There are many things I can do and many things I can't, unless I have to – roller coasters for example. I can't do roller coasters. The precipitous rolling. Over time, though, I have learned to do things I thought I couldn't.

There are many people who can handle many parts of being church – worshipping, interacting with others, reflecting on the Bible, trying to live ethically, helping practically, offering care, visiting the sick, but there is one part with which many of us struggle – praying with others. Just don't ask me to pray with others, people say.

That reticence is understandable. We don't want to rush in. We try to do things well. We value theology and language. We're encouraged to be thoughtful about how we name God. When we come to God we want to be respectful. That's healthy, right? Of course, ministers are expected to pray at the drop of a hat, but that's understandable because they receive years of training.

The risk is that praying with others can become seen as a professional skill or an act that requires preparation. We can become afraid to pray for fear of doing it wrong or making a mistake or offending someone.

There is another barrier - our experiences of public reaction. I was once at the bedside of someone who had died, surrounded by family and friends. They were a person of faith so I asked the family if they would like me to pray. As soon as I asked the question, the room went cold. We moved from singing and talking, to awkward silence. They were afraid of what I would say. But the husband said ... yes, that would be good. And so I prayed a short prayer. And at the end, I could feel the relief that I had not used certain words, that I had not made people feel more awkward.

I am not sure what previous experiences those people had of prayer. Perhaps they were thinking of television evangelists.

Praying aloud in public is becoming more common. Functions commonly begin with karakia. A few months ago I went to a fundraiser at a surf club. The most secular event you could imagine. It began with karakia, a prayer. Everyone expected it. No one objected. A few weeks later, my sister and I had lunch with a family friend who was a kaumatua, a Maori elder. My sister and I were about to

start eating but had the sense to pause, and the elder stood at the table and said grace in te reo Maori. Neither of us expected it. Neither asked for it. It was what he did. It was normal. It might become more normal for Pakeha. The te reo Maori movement sweeping our nation is making prayer an expected ritual, even if so far it is prayer in te reo Maori.

Which brings us to the letter of James. James brings big ideas to practical expression. He wants to make sure that someone takes responsibility for praying over people who are sick. He wants people who are sick to ask the elders to pray over them.

“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.” James imagines being part of a congregation that prays for others. In our day it is not just elders who pray. Many of us have been asked by friends to pray for a friend or a relative or a situation. A person facing a difficult choice, or applying for a new job, or having an operation or going through a time of grief. We always say, don't we - Of course I will pray. It's what we do.

Thursday a week ago, one of our Church Council members was making a presentation to the Justice select committee. A pretty intimidating venue. So we emailed the Church Council to surround her in prayer. It's what we do. Joan had been diagnosed with breast cancer. She was young and fit and had a young family. She never expected to be sick and she was worried. She knew other people with breast cancer. What made it harder was, her husband struggled to know what to say, so he didn't say anything. She began treatment, she had chemotherapy, she was often tired, but still they hardly talked about it. Joan belonged to a church so she asked her group of friends at the church to pray for her. It was the most natural thing to do. It's what we do.

People in our congregation face many challenges and we pray for them. It's what we do.

In what I am about to say, I don't want to suggest that there is a right way to pray. What I want us to do is just to keep trying to pray, and as we go, reflect and try again. That's how we learn. I had only been a Christian for maybe a month, and found myself in a young adult group of about 20 seated in a circle, and we went person to person praying, and I realised I would have to say something. I had never prayed out loud before. But I gave it a go, and later I thought about what I did, and asked friends how to do it, and decided to learn more, and so next time I did it a bit different.

I am borrowing a pattern from Sam Wells of St Martin's in the Fields in London. I am not saying this is the right way to pray. I am saying, if you are nervous or afraid about praying out loud with others without preparation, here is a possible way to start. Nothing more than that. The pattern is similar to what we see in many Psalms. Sam offers five steps.

The first step - approach God respectfully. Who might God be in this situation. So if we are praying for Joan, it might be, Tender hearted God or Companion God or Loving God or Gentle caring God or ?

The second step is to name how God has been faithful in the past, to remind God and ourselves of what God has done. It might be something from the Bible or something from our own experience. Caring God, we remember how Jesus came alongside people who were afraid. Or we remember how Jesus offered help to people who were unwell or Companion God, you journeyed with your people through all their struggles. A simple phrase that reminds God and us of God's faithfulness.

The third is to say what you are asking of God. Tender God, who in Jesus took flesh, keep Joan safe in your love. Or send your Spirit of healing into Joan's life or fill Joan with your spirit of peace or ...

The fourth is to name what God might change in our congregation or in the world. Tender God, who has held your people close when they suffer, fill Joan with your spirit of healing, and pour out your spirit on our Church that all who struggle feel supported.

The fifth is to end with "through Jesus Christ", and if we want to, we can add on a phrase – through Jesus Christ our companion on the journey.

Praying for others is what we do. When people have prayed with me in my struggles, I have felt lifted beyond what words can convey into the presence of God. It reframes what I am experiencing. It's what we do.

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