

FAMILY OF FAITH
18th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Steven D. Spencer
James 5:13-20

Our baptism puts us into a unique relationship with God. He is our Father and we are His children. But our baptism also puts us into a unique relationship with one another. We have the same Father and we are brothers and sisters.

To say it a bit differently, through Holy Baptism we are brought into a vertical relationship with the Triune God. United in Christ, who is the Son of God, He becomes our Brother, and we share in His Sonship as sons and daughters of the Father. As sons and daughters we are brought into a horizontal relationship with each another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Now what this means as a baptized child of God, you are part of a family. You are brothers and sisters, not only with those sitting here, but with people all over the world, most of whom you have never met. Some will have different colored skin; some speak a language foreign to you. In fact, most of these brothers and sisters you will meet for the first time in heaven.

So, what we call "the Christian Church" is not an organization but a family. A family put together by the Holy Spirit who enlightens and calls and gathers one individual at a time into this family of God. And family takes care of family.

We've lost a lot of that in our earthly families. Being separated by distance, differences, divorce, it's hard for family to take care of family. And so, out of necessity, we have learned how to take care of ourselves. And in doing so, a couple of things have happened. Along the way, we've forgotten what it means to be family. Families share with each other. They share burdens and joys and take care of one another. Through this separation we've become independent. And we've convinced ourselves that this is a good thing. Have we forgotten what God said; *"It is not good for the man to be alone?"*

It's not hard to see how this attitude of independence and self-reliance has carried over to our baptismal family. There are lots of Christians who, I suspect, who see no need to be a part of the family of God. So, even though they may believe, they don't belong to or attend church. Statistically, Oregon is one of the most un-churched states in the country. I imagine that many of the "un-churched" confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. But they have no interest in being a part of the family into which they were baptized.

I imagine that a significant portion of those who do belong to a local congregation, who do attend worship, who do receive the gifts that are given, hardly interact with the other members of the congregation outside of worship. Maybe it's because some congregations are really tight-knit families that don't include newcomers or outsiders very easily. Or maybe it's because the person doesn't want to get involved and participate in the sharing of one another's joys and burdens. Privacy and self-sufficiency, in our day, is often preferred over family and care and support for one another.

The Bible speaks nothing of this idea of an 'unaffiliated believer.' I did a quick search for the number of times the phrase "one another" is used in the bible. 146 times! The word 'together' is used 337 times. All through the Scriptures the life of faith is linked to community as family and not in isolation as individuals. The Bible speaks nothing of the "Jesus and me" type of spirituality. The Christian life is always 'communitarian' and never 'unitarian' (with a small 'u.')

Through Holy Baptism, we have been made children of God. That makes us brothers and sisters with one another. We are family, and family takes care of family.

Now that's a long introduction to our Epistle text for this morning from James. But James is talking to the family about being family. James isn't telling us how a good biological family is supposed to work. Peter and Paul cover that. James tells us how a good baptismal family is supposed to work. Family takes care of family.

In chapter 2, James writes about how family takes care of family when someone in the family experiences financial or economic hardship. ***"If a brother or sister (see whom he is talking to?), is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'go in peace, be warmed and filled,' what good is that?"*** (James 2:15-16).

In chapter 3, James writes about how careful family members have to be with their tongue. Think of the fires that are set in some congregations by something said. ***"From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brother and sisters, these things ought not be so."*** (James 3:10). In chapter 4, James says, ***"Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters"*** (James 4:11). As brothers and sisters in Christ, we ought to use our tongue not to say whatever comes to mind, but to build up one another in the faith and encourage one another in love.

Now in chapter 5, James says, family takes care of family when family members experience trouble, and he lists several different kinds of trouble that we all face from time to time. ***"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."*** (James 5:13-20)

These are not financial or economic problems but physical, emotional and spiritual problems. Some are suffering. The word for suffering that James uses here is the word associated with depression. Each of us, have our own weaknesses and vulnerable areas that the devil loves to attack. When temptations arise and hit us where we're weak, we suffer doubt, despair and depression. We suffer as we resist and the devil tries to push us over the edge. How do family members care for the suffering?

Some are sick. Physical sickness causes us to suffer physically and emotionally and spiritually. Physical illness can test our faith. How do families care for family members who are sick?

Some have sinned. Certainly we all sin, but James is referring here to sin that brothers and sisters commit against one another, or a particularly grievous sin that causes the brother or sister to feel ashamed or wonder if God can forgive them. How do families care for family members who have sinned?

Some have wandered from the faith. Rarely do people leave the faith in anger or opposition, although sometimes it does happen. But it's usually just as James describes it, wandering, drifting. How do families care for family members who are drifting or have wandered from the faith?

James' is all about faith in action. ***"What good is it my brothers if someone says he has faith but does not have deeds?"*** (James 2:14). But the problem that we so often face is, what can we do? When it comes to financial and economic problems, we know what we can do. We can help our brother and sister with financial assistance, food and clothing, and we should do that.

But what can we do for our brother and sisters who suffer from physical, emotional and spiritual problems? These are problems that your money can't fix. The answer that James gives is prayer. Since I'm into counting today, 6 times in 6 verses, James directs us to pray one for another.

Prayer is what family does when family members are suffering, sick, caught up in sin or wandering from the faith. And prayer is no small thing. Listen to how James describes prayer. "***And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.***" "***The prayer of righteous person has great power as it is working***" (James 5:15-16).

So, what kind of prayer is this 'prayer of faith?' And who is the 'righteous person' whose prayer has such great power? The 'prayer of faith' is every prayer that is prayed believing that God the Father almighty has promised to hear it and answer it. Not because of its repetition or its length or even because of the number of people who are praying, but for the sake of Jesus Christ His beloved Son. And the 'righteous person' is the person who believes and prays, because it is through faith that a person is declared righteous before God. To modify James we could say, "*Show me your faith apart from your works and I will show you my faith by my prayers.*" (James 2:18)

This faith that shows itself by praying for others is rooted in our baptism. Through baptism we have been united with Christ, who sits at the right hand of the Father and intercedes for us. St. John writes, "***we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus the Christ the righteous one.***" (1 John 2:1). "Likewise" writes St. Paul, "***the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.***" (Romans 8:26)

Having been united to Christ the righteous one and clothed with His righteousness, we are bold to come before our heavenly Father, in the name of Jesus and along with Him, plead for our brothers and sisters.

See what's going on here? Jesus prays in heaven in our name and we pray on earth in His name.

One of the things that is the exclusive privilege of Christians is this privilege to come to our heavenly Father in prayer. No one else has the permission, the invitation, or the authority to approach God the Father almighty except the members of His family. Jesus says: "***no one comes to the Father except through Me.***" (John 14:6). What a blessed privilege prayer is. What a shame that it is so poorly appreciated and utilized by the family for the family.

Very often when we are suffering or sick or caught up in some sin or wandering from the faith, we are unable to pray. We just cannot do the very thing that we really need to do, so we depend upon our family members to do for us what we cannot do. They are able to lift us up to the Father when we cannot pray ourselves.

This is how our life together in the family of God as brothers and sisters in Christ is to be. Family cares for family. The great error and failure of the "unaffiliated" or detached Christian is that he or she does not participate in the life of the Christian family as we are called to do.

All along, we have been calling this the "family of God." A more familiar name for what we have been talking about is "the communion of saints." Let me close with a few words from Dr. Martin Luther:

"This is the communion of saints in which we glory. Whose heart will not be lifted up, even in the midst of great evils in this communion, where others bear my burdens and their strength is my strength. The faith of the church comes to my aid in my doubt and fear; the chastity of others endures the temptation of my flesh; the fastings of others are my gain; the prayer of another pleads for me...."

Who could then despair in his sins? Who would not rejoice in his sorrows? He no longer bears his sin and punishment – and if he does bear them he does not bear them alone – but is supported by so many holy children of God, yes, even by Christ himself." (Luther Volume 42 Devotional Writings).

You are not alone. You are part of a family of believers with Christ Jesus as your brother. Pray for each other, love one another and know you are loved. By us and by God the heavenly Father who sent His Son to pay for your redemption with His own blood. For by Christ you have been adopted and are a child of God. Redeemed and forgiven in the name of Jesus. In Jesus name and for Jesus sake, Amen and amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and mind in Christ Jesus, AMEN.

We confess together our Christian Faith with the words of the Apostles' Creed.