

9-27-2009, 17 Pentecost B
Chapelwood UMC, Lake Jackson

Huddle Up
James 5:13-20

Fred Craddock tells the story of his father. Fred is one of America's outstanding preachers. He teaches preaching at Candler School of Theology. His father was never a church-going man. Dr. Craddock said that he and many others invited his father to church on many occasions. But his response was always the same. He would say, "All those church people want is my money and another body to add to their count." At the end of his life, Dr. Craddock's father developed a terminal illness. He was in the hospital for many weeks. During that time the people from the church in his community visited him daily. They told him the church was praying for him. It was obvious to all that he would never get out of that hospital. And he certainly had no money to give to the church.

One day Dr. Craddock went to visit his father. As he entered the room, some of the church members were winding up a visit with his father. They said a short prayer and left. Dr. Craddock's father wanted to tell him something, but he could no longer talk. He had a half-pint milk carton left from his lunch. He picked it up and motioned to Dr. Craddock, asking for something to write with. Dr. Craddock handed him a pen. His father wrote on the bottom of the milk carton, "I was wrong."

At the end of his life, he finally realized the truth. The church is much more concerned about people than they are about budgets and attendance figures. One of the ways we show our love and concern for one another is by praying for one another.

This is a praying church. We pray for dozens of people. We have lists of people we pray for. Daily prayer requests are sent to the people to our prayer teams. We even have the prayer pagers. When someone prays for a person with the prayer pager, they dial the number of the pager, and it buzzes them to let them know another prayer has gone up for them.

I have been visiting with several of our members when their prayer pager went off. In every instance, I have seen joy on their face, as they said, "Someone is praying for me."

There is power in prayer. Part of the power is the supernatural response of God. God does hear the prayers of the church and answers them. On rare occasions God's answer is to perform a miracle, something totally contrary to the natural laws. Just a couple of weeks ago Jim LaRebeus was telling me about his brother. You remember that he was working on a car, and it came off the blocks and fell on him. When they got his brother to the hospital and did x-rays, one of the things they found was several broken ribs. The next time they x-rayed him, there were no broken ribs. They have both sets of x-rays. Normally broken ribs don't heal in a couple of days. There were a lot of prayers being lifted up for this man. For some reason God chose to answer those prayers with a miracle.

We've all known of miraculous healings. These are rare. Why God chooses to answer some prayers with miraculous healings, I don't know. I don't believe it is because some people don't have enough faith. I have known many people who knew God could heal them, who were not miraculously healed. I have known many people who expected God to heal them, and it didn't happen. It wasn't a lack of faith. You remember that Paul prayed that God would take away his thorn in the flesh, and God didn't do it. Was it because Paul lacked faith? I don't think

so. It is because God's wisdom is greater than ours. True faith is to say, "If it be thy will, take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done." True faith is to trust God's wisdom.

The truth is that we seldom see miraculous healings in response to our prayers. But we see lots and lots of healing. The great majority of people we pray for get well.

Someone might say, "Well, they would have gotten well, whether we had prayed for them or not." No, many studies have been done that have shown that people who are prayed for recover in greater numbers and more quickly than those who are not prayed for.

Why is that? Again, when we pray we release the healing power of God. But something else happens. Not only do our prayers release the healing power of God, but also the love and care which leads us to pray is healing as well.

People who know that they are loved, that people care about them, want to live more than those who don't.

Back in the early days of the Soviet Union, Russia created a state institution for orphaned infants. They had a mass production process to care for these thousands of babies. They had all these cribs lined up, and the nurses would come through, feeding them, changing them, giving them medicine. They were given the finest care modern medicine could provide. Yet an unexpected high number of these babies died. The scientists couldn't figure out what the problem was. Finally someone noticed that no one ever picked up those babies and held them. They put into the routine time for the babies to be held and stroked. The survival rate increased dramatically. These babies were dying for lack of love.

In order to be healthy, we need to be loved. We never outgrow that need.

This month we have been looking at the Book of James. James tells us in the first chapter that his goal for those who read his letter is that they would be mature and complete. The rest of his letter is telling us what people who are mature and complete in Christ look like.

Here at the end of his letter he reminds us that mature people care about each other. They pray for each other.

They also reach out to those who stray from the fellowship.

The temptation when someone stops coming to church is to say, "If they don't need us, we don't need them." We get our feelings hurt and feel rejected.

What I have found, again and again, is that people who stop coming to church are the ones who most need the church. Often they are going through some kind of crisis. Some are struggling with substance abuse. Some are having marital problems. Some are caring for a family member who is having severe health problems. In some cases they are feeling unloved and rejected by God or by the church.

If we are mature, rather than feel angry and rejected, we will be concerned for them. We will pray for them, and we will reach out to them.

There was a man who had been very active in church. He began dropping out of leadership positions, and then his attendance at church functions dropped off dramatically, until he finally quit coming altogether. His pastor was guessing that he didn't like his sermons, or something had said something or done something which offended him. Eventually he was indicted for embezzlement at his business. Then the light came on. The pastor realized that he was avoiding church because he was feeling guilty. He didn't want to be that close to God. Turns out that he had a gambling addiction and he felt this was the only way he could pay his debts. Someone from the church went to the man and told him that the church was praying for him. He urged him to come back. He said, "You need the church now more than ever." The

man said, “The church doesn’t want me back.” The church member said, “Yes, we do. We have missed you. We want you back.” Others from the church went to him. At his trial members of the church testified as character witnesses on his behalf. He got probation.

And he came back to church. Eventually he went to his pastor. He said, “Pastor, as awful as this experience has been, I’m glad it happened. I had no idea how many friends I had. I feel better about myself and my life than I have in years. The people in this church have saved me.”

I played football for a few years. I wanted to be the star of the team. I wanted to win every game all by myself. That didn’t work very well. Eventually I realized that it takes a team working together to win games.

When we huddled up, we would throw our arms around one another. We did this to get close enough to hear the play calls. But there was another, more important reason we did it. It was to feel like a part of a team, to feel the strong arms of our teammates around us and to know that if we got knocked down, they would be there to pick us up.

On Sunday morning we huddle up. We come together to affirm that we are in the game of life together. We know we can’t win this battle alone. If we get knocked down, we have people who will pick us up.

Mature Christians support and care for each other. We huddle up to affirm our unity in Christ. We care for each other enough to pray for one another. We care enough to overcome our feelings of rejection and reach out to those who stray.

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