

## Let's Be Real

A Sermon Preached By Rev. Jessica Gregory

James 5:13-20

September 27, 2015

As part of his United States tour, on Thursday morning Pope Francis addressed a joint meeting of Congress. In his inspiring speech reminding us from where we've come and where we must go as a nation, the Pope named the responsibility we all have to protect one another and to work toward the common good. As concerned citizens, we must provide healing and live in hope so that our shattered communities and countries can again become whole. As Pope Francis lamented: The contemporary world [has] open wounds. These wounds affect so many of our brothers and sisters!

We know all about these wounds. Living in an age of 24-hour news cycles, facts instantly are available to us through our smart devices, and in-depth international reporting unique to our time. We know a lot -- sometimes too much. We know about the four million Syrian refugees (two million of whom are children) desperate for a place to be as they leave all they have known for an uncertain future. We know about the nuclear threat that Iran poses to the world. We know about the Nepal earthquake that struck in back April, causing avalanches in the Himalayas and killing over 8,000 people. We know about the unrelenting gun violence in Chicago. We know that we must have honest conversations about race and racism to bring our country back together.

We know that our world has myriad open wounds. The extent of its injuries is overwhelming. Our hearts break as we hear about one crisis after the next. In many situations there is nothing better for us to do than pray -- and we do. We pray faithfully for others -- for our families, our friends, our communities, our country and our world. We pray for healing and we hold onto hope, even as our prayers go unanswered and the wounds fester. This is our reality.

This reality made the task of me preaching on this passage from James a daunting one. James' claim — The prayers of faithful will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up — is just one of several that is difficult to believe, given our reality—a reality that at times directly contradicts this proclamation. Plenty of the sick who are prayed for die. And plenty of the sick that are not prayed for — who do not have any faith and don't know Jesus — live. As one woman remarked to me, life really is just a crap shoot.

Such pushback to this Scripture is fair, if our understanding of healing is to be physically restored and the fact that the Lord will raise them up only means they are taken from us. But James meant much more.

In his description of "save the sick" he referred to both physical healing *and* spiritual salvation, and to him being "raised up" was to begin life eternal with God, whose resurrected son assured us that death is never the end. When we pray, we are reminded of whose we are, as well as whose our loved ones are -- whether they recognize that or not. When we pray we are not just

asking for someone to be made well; for peace to blossom in the cracked lands of the Middle East; for God to be with the person whose father just died; we are admitting to ourselves and to God that we are weak and He is strong. We are needy and She is available. We are afraid and God is fearless. To pray is to do something vital for both us and those for whom we pray. That is why James, in his very brief letter – not so much a real correspondence to a specific community as a booklet of Christian wisdom – includes in it his description of how Christians are to live. James passionately believed that one's faith, or trust in God, should produce a response in one's way of living. From this understanding comes the phrase for which James is most famous, "faith without works is dead."

He ends his writing with the topic of prayer because it brings together his concerns for Christians described earlier in the letter about caring of those in need and taking care in how you speak and act. If all we do and say is done in prayer we will live out our Christian faith in powerful and transformative ways.

This congregation does well at addressing these concerns of James. We are a caring people who serve faithfully, care for others, and speak to one another in love and respect, even and especially when we disagree with one another.

But we are not off the hook, for we have much to learn about James' command: "...confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed." We are *very* good at talking about the wounded world in which we live, and even our wounded family and friends as they face medical battles -- some in the fights of their lives. We are *not so* good at talking about our wounded selves to one another. In his recommendation that we confess our sins to one another, James is instructing us to reveal our wounds, to risk cracking the façade that we put on that we -- unlike the world and people around us -- are just fine. We are not "busy, but good!"

We are imperfect. We are hurting. We are scared. We are alone. We are ashamed.

We love a good story, which is why TED talks are so appealing and popular. TED — Technology, Entertainment and Design — is a global set of conferences focused on "ideas worth spreading." The speakers are given a maximum of 18 minutes for their "talk" in which they present their ideas in the most innovative and engaging ways they can. In December of 2010 Brene Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate School of Social Work, delivered a TED talk entitled the "power of vulnerability." She begins by stating what her decade in social work taught her about humans' purpose for being: connection. In her words, "This is what it's all about. It doesn't matter whether you talk to people who work in social justice, mental health and abuse and neglect, what we know is that connection, the ability to feel connected, is – neurobiological -- that's how we're wired -- it's why we're here." ([https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability/transcript))

Brown's experience and research confirmed what James alludes to as he commands his readers to "confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another..." He tells us to connect with

each other! He tells us to be authentic – to be real with one another. To do so is to live a life of abundance even in times of brokenness. For in such living, “we may be healed.”

If only this were easy. Brown names the challenge in it -- revealed after six years and hundreds of interviews of every kind -- and that challenge is to let go of who we think we should be in order to be who we are. This is essential for connection.

Brown goes on to reveal what else her interviewees with healthy connections had in common: “They fully embraced vulnerability. They believed that what made them vulnerable made them beautiful. They didn't talk about vulnerability being comfortable, nor did they really talk about it being excruciating ...They just talked about it being necessary as a result of authenticity...”

We must let go of who we think we should be in order to be who we are. This is essential for connection.

Are we willing to let go? Are we willing to expose the sorrows of our souls with another? Are we willing to share with others in the community as if they really are our brothers or sisters? Are we willing to say aloud our imperfections, our weaknesses, our struggles -- thus admitting them to ourselves and the other?

Think for a moment about what you might share in such a conversation -- you can think in general terms -- one word descriptions are fine. Now I encourage you to say that word out loud. You don't have to say it to anyone in particular or offer any context about it, just say it out loud. Put it out there for God and you to hear. On the count of three.... Deep Loss.

Congratulations -- you have just completed the first step in your healing process. You have admitted to your imperfection out loud. We are not going to take the next step of sharing with another now, but I challenge you to do so -- and to ask for prayers. It is hard but it works...I know.

On February 22, 2012, Ash Wednesday, I suffered a miscarriage. I awoke that morning in pain, rushed into the bathroom and lost what had been growing within me for six weeks. I lost the hope and expectation of a child who would grow with us for his or her life. I lost a part of myself. I was devastated. The months passed and we did not get pregnant again. I became depressed and lonely -- despite having many good friends. My loss separated me from others -- almost no one could understand my profound sadness and aching heart. One who could was a friend who knew my pain, as she too had struggled conceiving her second child. With Julie I could expose my sorrow. I exposed who I really was in that time -- a broken, sad woman of faith who couldn't pray -- at least not about this. Julie listened. Julie prayed. Julie journeyed with me during that long year of grieving, waiting and wondering. Through that relationship God healed me....I am sharing this with you now as a model of the power of vulnerability and to invite you to open yourself up to it.

Confess your sins to one another. Pray for one another so that you may be healed.

Friends, there IS power in vulnerability. For in those thin spaces where we are most tender, God's grace has the chance to flow within us and act as a soothing balm on the burn of our hurt, our shame, our grief, our anger, our anxiety.

There are also risks. Big risks. After all these brothers and sisters sitting next to you in the pews aren't going anywhere. There is tension as we live in committed community with one another while really not knowing one another. It is one thing to tell all to the stranger sitting next to you on the airplane that will take your story of woe with her as she goes to baggage claim and back into her life and it is quite another to tell your partner in ministry with whom you serve on the finance committee and Session and see every week. As one Bible study member said, "If you really knew me, you wouldn't like me." To be vulnerable, we must trust one another and trust God that in our weakness we really are made stronger AND that we ARE ENOUGH -- just as we are. And people will still like us, imperfections and all!

Our contemporary world is filled with open wounds. We are filled with open wounds. How different might the world look if we first admitted these wounds and allowed God's grace to soothe them and then, from a place of wholeness, worked together to heal the world? The phrase heaven on earth comes to mind. I challenge all of us to be real and find out. Amen.