

SERMON: Boomerang Prayer
TEXT: James 5:13-20

9-26-21

One of my favorite movies is called *Leap of Faith*. It came out in the early 90's, but I hadn't heard of it until my seminary evangelism professor assigned it as homework one weekend. (Now, going to the movies is my kind of homework!) Steve Martin plays Jonas Nightingale, an evangelist with a traveling revival show. He's also a con man who delivers great entertainment complete with music, lights, and fog, along with healings and other answered prayers, cleverly wrapped in smoke and mirrors. When one of his fancy tour busses breaks down in a small, rural community suffering the effects of a recent drought, he decides it's a good place to set up the tent and gather the townsfolk for preaching and prayer.

People from miles around fall for his con hook, line, and sinker. In fact, they come back night after night, bringing relatives and friends with them to see the healing miracles this holy man performs. And they keep giving money that they can't afford to give. But there's one boy of about 13 who uses crutches, his legs having been permanently damaged in an auto accident that killed his parents. Jonas befriends the boy in order to get a date with his beautiful older sister. The boy becomes enamored with Jonas, and believes with all his heart that Jonas can heal him.

With his conscience pricked, Jonas knows he can't actually heal him, so he tries to convince the boy that his faith is misplaced and it's not as simple as it looks. Jonas blames the boy's sister and the other townspeople for their lack of faith. Finally, the boy appears on stage one night toward the end of the revival. Jonas tries to ignore him, then claims he has no more healing power in him, that his energy is spent and he needs to rest. But the boy draws closer to center stage, where a figure of Jesus nailed to a cross hangs from the rafters. When he gets to the foot of the cross, he reaches up with one hand to touch the feet of Jesus, then he drops his crutches and slowly begins to walk on his own.

The crowd explodes in cheers and rejoicing while Jonas angrily sneaks out the back way. He knows the jig is up and God has just beaten him at his own game. He leaves his sequin-covered suit jacket on the bed in his hotel room and walks to the main highway where he sticks out his thumb to hitch a ride out of town. Soon he's hopping in the cab of a semi. Gazing out the window, he sees people from miles around gathered together, sharing a meal, reading the Bible, praying for one another, and rocking their children to sleep. Just then, it begins to rain, and people are dancing and singing, jumping for joy and squealing with delight, hugging and crying and praising God.

I've seen the movie a half a dozen times, and it always makes me cry. Because Jonas Nightingale the con man didn't give God enough credit. And now God has shown him *true* miracles and *real* answers to prayer. Though he used God for his own gain, God has now used him. Jonas never intended to bring people back to God, to strengthen their faith, and to heal their community, but that's exactly what happened.

The movie makes me cry because I have also been guilty of not giving God enough credit. I, too, have had a hard time believing that God answers prayer.

Today's scripture from James tells us that "the prayer of faith will save the sick," and "the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." But we believe ourselves to be faithful people, and we all have stories about people we have prayed for who were not healed, who were not saved. We all have experienced times when our own prayers seemed *powerless* and *ineffective*. And those times can cause us to question God's promises and God's power.

First of all we need to understand that James was writing not to individuals, but to churches, to communities of faith. Prayer was an action of the community. "Are any *among you* suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should

sing songs of praise. 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.” No matter what our circumstances, whether we are suffering or cheerful, sick or well, prayer is *always* needed and *always* appropriate in the community of faith.

Notice that confession also, is a community responsibility. “Confess your sins to one another,” James wrote, “and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.” Now, let’s be honest. We don’t like the idea that there is a connection between sin and illness. We don’t believe that our loving God would make us sick as a punishment for our sins. But for the Jewish people to whom James wrote, this was their belief. Sickness was a result of sin, and if you think about the way our minds and bodies are connected, it makes sense.

Physical illness can be a natural result of guilt or hatred or broken relationships that we don’t talk about, that we try to ignore. When we don’t let go, when we don’t confess and resolve our negative feelings, they *can* make us sick. If your spirit isn’t healthy, it’s more likely that your body won’t be healthy either. But

when we confess our sins publicly, in prayer with the community, we are brought back into right relationship with God **and** with the community.

Prayer really is powerful and effective. Scientific studies have found that those affiliated with any religious community spend less time in the hospital than those with no religious affiliation. Those attending church at least once a week are half as likely to have depression as those who attend less often. Church goers have fewer anxiety disorders and healthier lifestyles. Regular attendance at church is as effective as exercise at extending longevity. And praying for 10 to 20 minutes a day can decrease blood pressure, heart rate, breathing, and metabolic rates.

There's something else I noticed in this passage that hadn't occurred to me before. "Pray for *one another* so that *you* may be healed." This is where I thought of prayer as a boomerang. When I pray for you, the healing comes back to me. When we pray for each other, we are all healed. The whole church is healed. If not physically, then spiritually. Whatever blessings we can spread throughout our family, our neighborhood, our country, our world, will come back to us.

Though his motives were for evil and not for good, Jonas Nightingale brought that rural community together. They prayed for one another, and the healing came back to them in a clearer sense of God's presence in the Spirit, a stronger bond of love for God and neighbor, and a renewal of hope in Christ.

BOOMERANG PRAYER. Send it out and it will come right back to you.

“Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 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. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”

To the glory of God! AMEN.