

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon Text: Numbers 11:4-29
Related text: James 5:13-20
Date preached: September 27, 2009

Grace to you and peace from God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

These past several weeks, I've heard the voices of our members who are suffering. Some are suffering from grief. The loss of a loved one has touched individual families and our church family very deeply.

In such instances people may already feel alone in their suffering. The letter of James bids those who are suffering to pray. In the midst of our hurt, sorrow and grief, James turns us to our relationship with God.

James bids us to speak to God who is able to love us in the midst of the anger we feel in our loss, the helpless void in our midst, and the confusion of living life in this new identity.

The grief I've heard expressed is not limited to the loss of a loved one. Many of us are grieving the loss of connectedness with the wider church because of decisions made that go against what we have learned and studied in scripture.

Like the Israelites who followed Moses into the wilderness we too are feeling the bewilderment of a strange and unfamiliar place where we now find ourselves. As a result our fears grow. What more is there that we will lose is a question some are asking in their minds.

In the midst of our bewilderment and confusion both James and Moses are drawn to the same conclusions. Pray. Those who suffer are to pray because God is listening.

In listening there comes a time for God to act upon what he hears. The Lord answered Moses' appeal for help in leading the Israelites. The Lord answered the cry of those hungry for something more than flaky manna which was likely less tasty than our current day communion wafers.

Prayer draws us into conversation with God. But it goes much deeper. Prayer is not only an individual conversation, but one that is also a vital part of our communal life. Conversation with God brings us together with each other. That is God's ongoing work.

In worship we hold before God the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ who are sick. In a few weeks we will do this more deliberately in worship with the opportunity for those who desire to be anointed. Such a practice further draws us into the healing mystery of God and serves to bind us together as a community.

One of the things I hold dear about this congregation is the commitment we have to hold one another up in prayer. We are affirming. We place a value on community, even on issues where we as a congregation disagree.

In our scripture readings from Numbers and James, we hear the value of being a community. Together with Moses and James we are reminded of the precious gift of prayer, a gift which is as simple as a conversation.

In community we are drawn ever more deeply into the communion of saints. We share the forgiveness of sins. We proclaim the resurrection and life everlasting. These are not simply idle words we confess as part of the creed, but they are a living expression of our belief in God.

It is God to whom we cling in faith. In so doing we rejoice in the gifts of God. First the gift of God's Word that speaks to us in law and gospel. The gift of God's Word is alive in Christ Jesus. The gift of God's Word is proclaimed in Scripture reading, bible study, confirmation classes, Sunday school classes and sung in the hymns of the church throughout the centuries.

We cling to the gift of God's sacraments. In baptism we are made members of the whole body of Christ. Yes, we are baptized members of this congregation. Yes, we are baptized members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Yet even more significantly, we are baptized into the whole body of Christ that transcends time, space and denominational boundaries.

Our new life through Christ is one that brings us together, for the welfare of the sick, the poor, the suffering, the forgotten and all with whom Christ promises to be present.

Be the presence of Christ among those who struggle. Be the presence of Christ among the fearful. Be the presence of Christ in your families, in your schools, in your workplaces and wherever else the Holy Spirit leads. AMEN.