

Semicontinuous
Esth. 7:1–6, 9–10;
9:20–22
Ps. 124

Complementary
Num. 11:4–6,
10–16, 24–29
Ps. 19:7–14

Jas. 5:13–20
Mark 9:38–50

Concrete Practices

Goal for the Session *Considering James’ concrete instructions for faithful Christians, adults will practice ways to mediate God’s restorative healing in the world.*

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on James 5:13–20

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” E. Elizabeth Johnson

James writes, “The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up” (5:15a). This “prayer of faith” is faithful prayer, prayer that trusts God to answer the petition. Modern people sometimes look askance at such apparently naive confidence in so-called “faith healing.” That stems from a distinctly modern understanding of illness, though, one that presumes scientific analysis alone is able to assess a person’s state of health. James says that anointing, prayer, and the laying on of hands “will restore the weary” (my trans.), which is substantially more than merely prescribing antibiotics can do.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Mark Douglas

Prayer for James is not a private matter. Instead, it helps to shape a particular kind of community in which people are committed to each other. The sick call for elders to pray over them. Sinners confess to one another. The cheerful sing. For James, the community that prays together stays together—which is no small feat when there are so many things that can divide a community, many of which he has addressed throughout the book.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Kathy L. Dawson

The prayers of the community shape the congregation and allow the people to become more nearly the body of Christ. In churches I have attended, it is not unusual for prayer times to last from twenty to thirty minutes, when individual members of the congregation voice their prayers of supplication in worship. I am grateful and excited to hear how God is working and to know how to pray for others. In communal prayer we have the opportunity to listen for and be God’s voice in the world. Through prayer the congregation is empowered to carry out Christ’s mission. It is a practice in which all ages can participate. Prayer changes relationships and lives. It should be our first practice as a congregation, if we are truly to walk in James’s concept of godly wisdom.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Barbara Brown Taylor

We can connect the health of our congregations with concrete, communal acts of faith, beginning with things that are already taking place. Even if the list is short, we may not have thought of the ways in which something as routine as a Wednesday night supper offers chances to pray with the suffering and sing songs of praise with the cheerful. Does someone routinely take plates from such suppers to those who are too sick to attend? Why not send an elder or two along for the ride? Whether or not they take oil, the point is for the community to go in search of those at risk of being lost to it. The point is to go to them when they cannot or will not come to you.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

James 5:13–20

Focus on Your Teaching

Most Christian adults know prayer is an important part of the Christian life, but they may be uncomfortable praying on their own. Some participants may enjoy active prayer lives, while others may have only experienced prayer in worship led by others. Today's session explores insights from the book of James on prayer in Christian community. The study offers a chance to experience various forms of prayer and may help participants who struggle with praying. For those comfortable with praying already, they may learn a new practice to add to their prayer lives.

Be with me, Gracious God, as I prepare to lead this class. Give me confidence, wisdom, and faith in your presence. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- board or newsprint
- marker
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- bowl of water
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for October 4, 2015

For Responding

- option 1: newsprint, marker
- option 2: newsprint, marker
- option 3: Resource Sheet 1, newsprint, marker

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, make two columns on the board or newsprint. Label one column “Do” and the other “Promises.” If using option 1 in Responding, write these intercessory prayer categories on a sheet of newsprint: “Pray for the Suffering,” “Pray for the Cheerful,” “Pray for the Sick,” “Prayers of Confession,” “Pray for the Community.” If using option 2 in Responding, write the bulleted list of questions on a sheet of newsprint.

Welcome participants and have them form pairs or groups of three as they arrive. Have each person tell his or her group about a meaningful experience he or she has had of community prayer and describe what made the experience meaningful. To extend conversations, have groups imagine what elements might be incorporated into their community to make prayer more meaningful.

After a few minutes, gather participants and invite brief comments. Explain that in this session, they will explore how prayer can strengthen faith communities. Invite participants to hold hands and pray together. Lead them in this prayer or one like it:

Holy God, you create us for relationship with you and with one another. You invite us to share laughter, tears, support, and comfort in community. You promise to be with us when we gather in your name. Receive us as we gather this day seeking to draw closer to you. As we experience this time together feasting on your Word, help us to be mindful of the community you create among us. May we be strengthened by your grace and presence. Amen.

EXPLORING

Have participants read aloud James 5:13–20 going around the group with a different person reading each verse until it is complete. Allow for brief comments about the text.

James' letter gave instruction to early Christian communities, advising believers to live Christian lives and to be faithful together. As they align every aspect of life with their Christian faith, they are set apart from the influences of the world.

Display the prepared board or newsprint with the headings "Do" and "Promise." Go through the focus scripture as a group, listing the things the author says to do, such as "Pray if you suffer." Also list the promises the author mentions, such as "The prayer of faith will save the sick." Invite brief comments from participants when the lists are complete.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on James 5:13–20) and read the "What?" excerpt. Discuss:

- ✧ The author says the prayer of faith means one is confident that God is listening and will act. How is this different than faith healing?
- ✧ In an era before modern medicine, how did anointing, praying, and laying on of hands restore the weary?
- ✧ How can prayer and medicine complement each other?

Invite a volunteer to read the "Where?" excerpt, and ask:

- ✧ How do you think praying together kept the Christian community together?
- ✧ Why was solidarity important to the early Christian communities reading James' letter?

Focus on James 5:19–20 and discuss ways people imagine the early Christian community approached those who wandered from the truth. Then discuss how that might happen today.

As a transition to Responding, read aloud the "So What?" excerpt. Have people list ways your congregation prays together, including the variety of prayers during worship. Be sure to include activities such as e-mail prayer groups, Taize services, and so on. Discuss:

- ✧ How is prayer central to the life of your congregation?
- ✧ How can prayer be strengthened in your congregation?

EASY
PREP

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

1. **Pray with One Another** This activity allows participants to practice intercessory prayer. Call attention to the newsprint sheet prepared before the session listing the categories of intercessory prayer. Spend time allowing participants to call out specific things to pray for and record these in the corresponding prayer categories. Then pray together.

Offer these words, or something like them, to begin and end the prayer:

Draw us together, O God, in prayer for ourselves and our community. We pray especially for . . .

(include participants' petitions from the newsprint).

We trust these petitions into your compassionate hands, Holy God. May your will and your power reign with us and among us. Amen.

2. **Reconnecting** This activity encourages participants to reach beyond the walls of their faith community to consider ways to connect with brothers and sisters who have left the church or have not been attending for a long time.

Explain that often the church is concerned with inviting and attracting new members, and communities can forget members and friends who quit attending. These are once-active members who have not been involved with the church community for some reason.

Work with the group to consider how to reach people who are no longer part of your congregation. Form pairs and ask each pair to discuss these questions:

- ✧ What first brought you to this congregation?
- ✧ What keeps you connected to this faith community?
- ✧ How can these factors, which have been valuable to you, be offered to church members who are no longer active with your church?
- ✧ What other suggestions do you have for reconnecting with people?
- ✧ Name two or three people whom you might help to reconnect with your congregation. Pray for these people.

Gather all participants to tell one another the suggestions from their discussions. Challenge each participant, in the coming week, to attempt to reconnect with at least one person who has left your faith community.

- 3. Communal Acts of Faith** In this activity, participants brainstorm communal acts of faith that can strengthen their congregation. Read the “Now What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Invite brief responses to the reading.

Have participants brainstorm concrete congregational activities that help people connect with one another and record the ideas. They may include the suggestions found in the excerpt, or they may suggest actions that build upon activities the congregation is already involved with.

Encourage participants to claim one concrete activity from the list that they will follow through with in an effort to strengthen the congregation.

CLOSING

Gather participants and invite them to name one teaching they take from today’s scripture.

Explain the purpose of anointing from the sidebar and tell participants you will lead them in a brief anointing ritual.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Anointing Ritual). Model the ritual for participants by offering the first anointing. Have participants repeat the actions and words that you model, anointing one another. Lead the group in saying the closing blessing in unison to conclude the session.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for October 4, 2015, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

Anointing was a sign that a person was marked by God for a particular purpose, such as a king or a disciple. It was also a sign of inclusion. The church has used anointing rituals to accompany prayers for healing, confession, or ordination.

Focus on James 5:13–20

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Anointing Ritual

Dip your index finger or thumb into the water and rub a bit of water on the forehead or on the back of the hand of the individual on your right. As you make the mark, say these words to the individual:

“(Participant’s name), God loves you and welcomes you into this family of faith.”

Following the anointing, place a hand on the recipient’s shoulder and offer this brief prayer or one like it:

*Thank you, God, for this friend, (participant’s name).
Surround (him or her) with your love, grace, and peace. Amen.*

Give the water bowl to the individual you anointed; have him or her repeat the ritual with the person on his or her right. Participants repeat the anointing ritual for one another until each individual has received an anointing.

Final group blessing (in unison):

*The way is long, let us journey together.
The way is difficult, let us help one another.
The way is open before us, let us go . . .
with the love of God, the peace of Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

