

Why Not Ask?

A sermon by the Very Rev. Timothy Jones
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
September 30, 2018
James 5:13-20

Maybe you've heard the story of a businessman
running late for an important meeting downtown.

He couldn't find a parking space.

As he frantically circled the block, the poor guy
got so desperate that he decided to pray.

Looking up toward heaven, he said,

"Lord, take pity on me.

If you find me a parking space, I'll go to church
every Sunday for the rest of my life,
and not only that, I'll stop drinking so much."

Miraculously, a parking space appeared.

The guy looked up again and said,

"Never mind. I found one."

I like that story for the way it pokes fun at our
sometimes hurried, harried prayers.

But I also tell that story to raise a question:
When you pray, what do you pray about?
What do you say? I don't mean the times we pray
together formally here in church or the times we
might pray at the beginning of a committee
meeting or a vestry meeting.

I mean the practice many of us have
of praying during the week, in between our times
of formal church prayer. I mean set times of
prayer each day, which I want to encourage. And
prayers said in the thick of every day, making
prayer a daily habit.

But we have questions as we do.
Where do we begin? Is it okay to ask for things?
Running late for a meeting, should you pray for
parking spaces?

Well, our prayers should include adoration and
praise of God. Our prayers should include
confession, where we admit how we fail God and
others and need mercy. Our prayers should

include thanksgiving. And there is a rich tradition of prayers of lament in the Psalms, where some days our prayers are little more than groans.

But our prayers also can and should include the stuff of our daily, even ordinary life.

So here's the short answer to the question about asking prayer: If something is important enough to worry about, why not turn fold it your praying?

Why *not* pray about parking spaces?

And about a whole lot of

Even more urgent situations?

James, our epistle reading for today, offers some help here. He has spent a lot of time in this letter talking about how we behave, how we use our tongues, for example, in daily relating.

How we learn to live with generosity toward the poor, the widow.

While James is known for statements about faith leading to concrete deeds, about how faith without

works is dead, James also cares very much about
how we pray.

In today's reading, we see how he
is urgent to see us turn to God, and pray with
others, and pray for others.

Are any among you suffering? He asks.

They should pray. Are any cheerful?

They should sing songs of praise (another way to
pray, by the way), which we do every time we
sing a hymn. Are any among you sick?

They should call for the elders and have them
pray for them.

Whatever the everyday circumstances,

Whether you're hurting or happy,
sick or feeling sinful, you pray.

Different situations,
but a common response: you pray.

This week I'd add prayers for our country, too.

Are you weary with the polarization in our nation,
made worse this past week?

Wherever you stand on Brett Kavanaugh and
Christine Blasey-Ford, doesn't our country need
prayers now for the hurt and anger and
indignation and defensiveness so much on
display? Our nation needs healing of every kind.

So we pray. God here and elsewhere in the Bible
not only invites us to ask him for specific things,
he commands it. We certainly are told here in
James to pray for healing when we are sick.

When those we love are sick.

We see how prayer for healing is perfectly in line
with God's good intentions.

James talks about anointing with oil.

Which we still do use, to this day, at our healing
prayer service in Keenan Chapel
every Thursday.

In the ancient world, oil was one of the most
widely used medicinal substances.

The ancient physician Galen spoke of it.

One Old Testament prophet put it like this:
“From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds; they have not been drained, or bound up, or softened with oil” (Isaiah 1:6).

We are not talking about oil as a magic potion, but a tangible reminder of a God who acts and moves in the most ordinary of situations, who uses the most ordinary of substances.

Daubing oil on a forehead points to deeper realities, points to a God who, as Psalm 147:3 says, heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. Don't let not having anointing oil on hand stop you from praying, of course.

Always, we can turn to our God who cares about what someone calls life's grubby particulars, who cares about our ordinary hurts and extraordinary diseases.

Not that every need we ask for will be met.
Not every prayer leads to a miracle.
But we are promised God will hear.
That he will care.

Now sometimes I hear people say, “Well, God’s
got more important things to do than
listen to my little requests.”

He’s infinite and vast, high and mighty,
and here I am. Just little me, down here.
That sentiment sounds humble, even noble.

But is that the picture of God we get in the Bible?
Not in James, and not on page after page of the
Gospels where we watch Jesus’ healing ministry.

We see a God who says to us,
“No worry is too small for my caring notice.
Turn to me. Bring your needs.”

A lot of prayer is simply asking. That’s okay. It’s
not the only kind of prayer. But when we ask,

when we intercede, we ask knowing someone
listens—who's glad for it.

D. L. Moody once said, "Some people are afraid
they will trouble God by their constant asking.
The way to trouble God is not to come at all."

If it's important enough to worry about,
It's probably important enough to pray about.
The answer may be yes, or may be no.
Or it may be not yet.
But we are urged in Scripture to ask.

And the prayers modeled there don't use soft,
verbs. The prayers are vigorous and bold.
Like in the Lord's prayer. The statements Jesus
gave us in his prayer use the imperative tense in
the original language.

It's like, when you pray, *your will be done*, there
should be an explanation point after it.

Give us this day our daily bread.

Another exclamation point.

Your kingdom COME!

Like it should be in all caps.

And earlier, when Jesus says, ask, seek, knock.

the verses could be translated:

Keep on asking

Keep on seeking

Keep on knocking.

So, like one of the teachers says in our

Wednesday Alpha Prayer series:

Here's how to pray:

Keep it simple.

Keep it real

Keep it up.

“The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective,” we heard from James.

In all this, what you believe about God matters.

I remember early on in my faith journey how I
believed things *about* God,

I had had moments of quiet spiritual awareness,

but there came a time when I began to sense
that Christ was alive and close.

It wasn't me working myself into some state.

It was becoming aware of one
who was there all along.

In the person of Jesus, I saw that God was willing
to reside in my own life.

And because for the first time I really believed
someone was close,
for the first time I prayed
in more than the vaguest way.

Now, prayer is more than just private.

For note something else in James:
Sometimes we bring in the reinforcements.
We turn to others for their prayers.

Prayer flourishes in a community in which people
are committed to each other.

James puts it this way:

“Are any among you sick?”

They should call for the elders of the church”—
the leaders—“and have them pray for them.”

So sometimes we turn to another, to a flesh and
blood representative of God’s goodness
in a real person. We sometimes need God’s love
made concrete in the smiles and gestures and
handshakes and hugs of one another. Some days I
need to come together with people like you.

So pray with others.

Meal times and bed times with the kids are great
places to begin! Ask a friend to pray for you.

One more thing. We pray as a church,
but we also pray *for* the church.

We cry out for his work to be done here.

Do you pray during the week for your clergy, for
the staff, for your wardens and vestry,
our Sunday school teachers, our stewardship?
For our ministries in the wider community?
For our flourishing and growth?

I love this word I heard years ago, and I've never forgotten it. It's from John Mott, a Christian world leader of an earlier generation.

He traveled the world helping to tend Christian organization. "For years it has been my practice in traveling among the nations," he wrote, "to make a study of the sources of spiritual movements which are doing the most to revitalize and transform individual and communities. At times it has been difficult to discover the hidden spring, but invariably where I have had the time and patience to do so, I have found it in an intercessory prayer life of great reality.

Quoted in Maxie Dunnam's *Workbook of Intercessory Prayer*, (Nashville: Upper Room, 1979), 17.

So go ahead, ask away.

Pray for yourself.

It's okay. God can prod you
if it gets too self-involved.

Pray for the sick.

For our country.

Pray for the world.

Pray for Trinity Cathedral.

Our asking ties the presence of an extraordinary

God into the most ordinary circumstances.

Pray and they won't stay ordinary for long.