

## “Wisdom of the Crowd”

There is a television show that premiered this fall entitled “Wisdom of the Crowd” that I have gotten hooked on. Apparently, I am the only one who likes it because I understand that it is being cancelled but it has a very interesting premise. It is a drama about a tech billionaire in Silicon Valley who sells his company and creates a cutting-edge crowdsourcing app to solve his daughter's murder.

The online platform, named Sophe, aims to revolutionize crime solving in the process. As an aside, his name for the app is an interesting choice because “sophia” is the Hebrew word for “wisdom”. So the whole idea of the show is based on the importance of strength in numbers. In other words, a million minds are better than one. I considered this as I read the Scripture from James and thought about our installation of officers later in today’s worship. And I began thinking how our *collective* work, worship and prayers can be so much more effective than when we set out to do things on our own.

After discussing many practical aspects of being effective Christians, the writer of James closes his thoughts by addressing perhaps the most needed act of all. Prayer. Just as the TV show finds collective wisdom more useful than individual wisdom, James seems to say that the prayers of the Christian community can be more effective than individual prayer. This is not to discount the importance of our personal prayer life, but again, is offered as comment on the strength found when we combine our efforts.

James lists a number of scenarios that require prayer. Suffering and happiness. Illness and sinfulness. The spiritual needs in our lives like forgiveness as well as the more concrete

things, like rain. Anything that we are lacking or want to give thanks for should be expressed to God through prayer.

But it is the specific words “call for the elders of the church to pray” that brought this passage to my mind in the beginning. Later today, we will recognize that five of our brothers and sisters have been set apart by God to serve in the role of Elder. Now before any of you Elders-elect start getting a big head, decides to bolt out of the sanctuary in fear, or stands and declares your complete unworthiness, let me clarify.

Being an Elder in the Presbyterian church does not make a man or woman more “holy” than any other Christian. It simply affirms that you have been called, at this time, by the prayers of the congregation and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to be leaders in this body of Christ. In fact, James goes on to say that the “prayers of the faithful” will save, heal, forgive, direct and guide those who seek God. To you five faithful people who will officially be set apart later, I can only say that prayer will be your strongest ally in discovering God’s will for your individual leadership and for the life of Nazareth Presbyterian.

But if we only have five faithful pray-ers in this whole church, then we are seriously in need of an energetic evangelism campaign. Therefore, James words are really for all of us as we seek to be God’s faithful people in the world. Indeed, the passage emphasizes the need for the whole worshiping community to be faithful in prayer in order for God’s compassion to be made available to us all and to affirm the sovereignty of God.

Prayer uniquely binds human and divine activity together. By this I mean that prayer can only effect change if God hears and responds. And God can only hear if we offer our prayers to God. Praying is not only our privilege but our responsibility and the best way to seek God’s will for our lives and the life of the church.

As a body of believers, it is also important to consider that prayer is therapy for the toxicities of the world. Living prayerfully in awareness of God's activities in and on behalf of creation is vital to the well-being of all of God's children. Sin and illness and other things that cause each of us, all of us and our world to be separated from God can be addressed through prayer. And knowing how much this congregation believes in prayer, I think I can say with assurance that prayer connects the health of Nazareth Presbyterian Church with the concrete acts of faith that we engage in here.

What I mean is that all of our activities are ungirded by the prayers of the whole church family. Now of course, this is evident in our prayer chain. Yet, we also know that our worship, committee meetings, Sunday School classes and circles are grounded in prayer. But there is so much more praying that takes place here that you may be unaware of.

Every month, we end our Session Meetings by sharing personal prayer concerns with each other. I firmly believe that this not only binds us closer to God as leaders, but closer to each other, as we open up about the joys and concerns in our lives. Every time we take Communion to someone who is homebound or ill, we take not only the body and blood of Christ but the communal prayers from the church family to those individuals.

Much prayer is involved in the decision making of what we will learn in Bible Study and which missions we will be involved in. The same can be said for the activities that help us to choose leaders – and not just Elders – but Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, and members of our committees. Individual and group ministries like singing, offering rides to those who don't drive and preparing food are acts of prayer. Even our "Sharing the Peace" or Holy Chaos, as I call it, is a communal prayer in a way.

In truth, a praying community shapes the congregation and allows it to become more nearly the body of Christ. It defines us more clearly from other groups that do good works, like Rotary, Sertoma, PTA and others. Prayer also exposes our vulnerabilities by inviting others to share in our weaknesses and empowers the congregation to carry out the Great Commission of our Risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

Of course, there are many ways to pray. When ever I am approached about the right and wrong ways to pray, I am reminded of a poem I read many years ago in Reader's Digest.

"The proper way for man to pray," said Deacon Lemuel Keys, "and the only proper attitude is down upon his knees." "No, I should say the way to pray," said Rev. Doctor Wise, "Is standing straight with outstretched arms and rapt but upturned eyes." "It seems to me his hands should be austerey clasped in front, with both thumbs pointing towards the ground," said Rev. Doctor Blunt. "Las' year I fell in Hodgins' well, headfirst," said Cyrus Brown. "With both my heel's a -stickin' up, my head a pointin' down. And I made a prayer right then and there, best prayer I ever said, The prayingest prayer I ever prayed, a-standin' on my head!" Clearly our prayer life must be suited to our needs, our comfort level and our circumstances.

Some of the most beautiful prayers are when we remember the verse from a much beloved hymn and sing it, even if we only make a joyful noise. At other times, the best prayer we can make is to give God his own words back by speaking out loud or in our hearts a verse of Scripture that the Spirit brings to mind. When I am so tired and empty, sometimes I simply picture in my mind's eye a vessel being filled with living water in an effort to ask God to give me what I need. The ways to offer God our inmost thoughts are endless.

Now in a way, I feel like I am preaching to the choir because this church takes very seriously its call to prayer. Which is why I chose to combine James' words with the ones we heard from Exodus.

After Moses had led the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, we know they followed a very circuitous route to the Holy Land. It took them forty years to be exact. And God knew that this was to be a long trip because in the course of their travels, the writer of Exodus tells us that the Israelites have been "equipped for battle". (Exodus 3:18)

As they make their way to the Promised Land, at one point they are attacked by the Amalekites, a nomadic people who have always been hostile to the Israelites. A battle, and Moses realizes they need some encouragement from God. So he stands on a hill above the battle with both of his arms raised in the air. The Scriptures do not tell us that this is an act of prayer. It can be seen this way, but perhaps it was just a reminder that God was with them.

The writer of Exodus also tells us that, whenever Moses grew weary and lowered his arms to rest them a bit, the Israelites would start losing their fight. But when he raised his arms once again, they would gain a stronghold. Well, we can only imagine how exhausting this was for Moses. So Moses' brother Aaron and another friend Hur brought a stone for Moses to sit on. Then each man literally held up Moses arms when he grew weary, one on either side, so that the Israelites would be victorious.

Friends, as we ordain and install the Elders this morning, this passage reminds us that the Elders are not the only ones responsible for the life of this church or for the work of the kingdom. Each of us here is called to be Aaron and Hur – to hold up our brothers and sister – not only in prayer, but through participation in the work and worship that the Session feels called to do.

We are quite literally to provide the stone for the Elders to sit on and to take turns holding their arms in the air so that God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit can prevail as the Israelites did as we fight God's battles of today's world.

The Bible is clear that it takes not only trustworthy leadership but active community defense joining with the Divine to eliminate the threats that frustrate the building up of the kingdom. Every one of us here has an important role in sharing the Good News of God's grace given to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And the time to do it is now!

Friends, even as we celebrate this important day in the life of this church, may the Scriptures we have heard be a constant reminder that the wisdom of the crowd, the prayers of the faithful and the combined hearts and wills of the children of God are ALL needed to continue the work of Jesus Christ in the world. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.