

“The Prayer of Faith”
James 5:13-20

It was a total mayhem! As I drove through Conover and Charing roads in the Craig Henry area to pick up Brandon Scott, the guest speaker for the last weekend’s learning event, I saw uprooted trees lined over the street and houses with no roofs, shattered windows and damaged walls. Some trees slammed on cars and vehicles and there was no electric power. As if the world stood still. People huddled together, shock on their faces, as they walk around the devastated area. Others were busy taking photos while responders come and go in utility trucks and vehicles. On the other side of Nepean, firefighters climbed over downed trees to get into homes and check on residents in Arlington Woods neighbourhood, which took a direct hit from the second tornado that landed in Ottawa on Friday. The news captured the tornado calamity: “Dozens of 100-year-old white pines, part of a beloved forest the area is known for, were snapped like matchsticks and trees crashed through roofs, into windows and onto cars... On many houses, signs were written on the front doors “gas off, water off, power off.” Ken and I did a little tour of the Arlington Woods area on Monday and dropped by to say hello to a friend who lives in that neighbourhood. The tree in the front lawn through the roof of her house and landed over her car. I gave her a big hug and said “I will pray for you and your family”. And being a devout Anglican, she said, “Thank you. Prayers helped. I know it will be difficult in the next few weeks but I know we are going to be fine.” In that moment of chaos. Prayers helped. In that time of uncertainty, prayers helped. In times of fear and death, prayers helped.

Prayer. When you hear the word prayer, what comes to mind? Do you envision someone with closed eyes and folded hands uttering some words directed to the divine? Or do you think of “orante” the image of the woman with outstretched arms and palms up in a gesture of prayer used by Brandon Scott as part of his sermon last Sunday? Do you imagine someone bending over in a prostrate position or on his or her knees asking God’s forgiveness? Do you foresee tele-evangelists who believed that ardent prayers could produce supernatural interventions to heal the sick? What is your understanding of prayer? And the spiritual practice of praying? To this day, I take prayer seriously. I believe that prayer makes a difference in our spiritual, emotional, relational, physical, and planetary well-being. “I will pray for you,” is a common

phrase in our faith community, signaling a connection, a loving relationship, a caring gesture of solidarity or one that concludes a social encounter. It can be a statement of sincerity or contrition, backed by words of comfort with actual embodied, recited prayer or reflection. One question we get a lot is this: “Does prayer *really* work?” even the devoutly religious might ask, having been burned by unanswered requests and lost opportunities.

The book of James in its time and place, in the early Christian movement, believed in the power of prayer. James is a big fan of the spiritual practice of praying and encouraged the members of his congregation to pray. “Is any among you sick? Let them call for the elders.” James believes that the elders were responsible for intercessory prayer – that the prayers of a minister or an elder of the church are more powerful or effective than everybody else’s. After all they were chosen or ordained to carry out God’s work in the world. James is advocating the most normal thing in the world for those in the church. He taught the congregation to simply reach out, asking others to care for one another. James says, “Confess your offenses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (5:16). Here at BCUC, we pray for each other – we lift up those who need our care and prayers in the Prayers of the People. It is what normally happens when we live in community. The practice of praying is not only common among Christians but also among other faiths – be it Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu. It is in a context of community that prayer becomes more meaningful, more purposeful.

But not all of us pray. Because for some of us, prayer is but an empty gesture – a blabbering of words – of a wish list that may or may not happen. People sometimes asks- and who are you directing your prayer to? Theists would readily say “God” or Jesus or the divine or the sacred. And that’s the usual belief of many. While those who claim to be non-theists would say their prayers as a profession or statement of faith or concern directed to an energy or of the God within, to nudge them to work for justice, peace, love or hope. Prayer is a spiritual practice that most of us do because it grounds us and reminds us that we need each other in times of joy or sorrow, in celebration and in pain. It also puts us in a humble position – that something or someone is bigger than us – that we cannot do everything in our human, limited power and capability - that there is a power that gives us the ability to decide wisely, to choose which way to go, or makes us work for the betterment of the individual and the community. Prayer also

links us to history of our family or community. We recite the Lord's Prayer for instance because it is not just part of our upbringing as Christians – but it links us not only to our parents and grandparents who taught us what religion is about but also to the first century Christians who had the first account of Jesus and those who still recite this sacred prayer all over the world.

If you ask me if I pray and if I believe in the power of prayer, my answer is a resounding yes. Not because I'm a minister and that's what ministers do. But as a child, we were taught at home to pray- to give thanks, to pray for others, to ask, to confess. It is a spiritual exercise that I was brought up at home and at church. But my understanding of prayer, like my understanding of who God is had evolved though the years. I pray because it's what keeps me grounded and humbled and connected. I don't pray because I would like God to do something for me that I could not do like healing someone who is sick or grieving or in pain. I pray so that I will be able to be strong enough and inspired enough and caring enough to support others in times of need. Prayer is what feeds and nurtures me as a person of faith. I echo what CS Lewis says about prayer: "it does not change God but it changes me."

I take inspiration from a story shared by John Shelby Spong in his book *Unbelievable*. Spong has a stepdaughter named Rachel who joined the US Marine Corps and served three tours of duty in the second Iraq war. Those were stressful, high anxiety moments for both Spong and his wife. Knowing Spong as a high calibre progressive non-theistic Christian, people approached him several times to ask him if he prayed for Rachel. "Did you pray for your daughter while she was in Iraq?" And Spong answered: "Of course, we did!" And he further commented: "How could we not pray for one we love, whom we knew to be in great danger? The real question was, however, how did we understand what we were doing when we prayed? We prayed for our daughter because that is what love does. We held her in our hearts before God as we do all those we love when we are in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness or any other adversity." Spong believes and teaches that prayer does not bring a theistic God rushing to our aid. It does not protect us from danger, illness or even death. Prayer is not about the attempt to change reality; it is about how we approach that reality in a different way. I do believe, like Spong, that prayer changes more than anything else the person offering and reciting the prayer. Prayer nudges one to do something about the situation. It is in conversation, in connecting with the other, in doing

something about the situation being prayed for that God's presence is shared between and among people and situations.

On Friday this week, Ken and I had the opportunity to watch the farewell concert of legendary singer and songwriter Elton John. The whole concert was made more experiential with the use of colourful images and videos of different human experience, emotions, of global and personal human issues. When he sang "I Believe in Love", video clips about his work and support for AIDS and those affected by this disease in Africa and around the world were played on the background. The lyrics were profound. A prayer in action. Let me share the words with you:

I believe in love, it's all we got / Love has no boundaries, costs nothing to touch

War makes money, cancer sleeps / Curled up in my father and that means something to me

Churches and dictators, politics and papers / Everything crumbles sooner or later

But love, I believe in love

I believe in love, it's all we got / Love has no boundaries, no borders to cross / Love is simple,

hate breeds / Those who think difference is the child of disease

Father and son make love and guns/ Families together kill someone Without love,

I believe in love – Without love I wouldn't believe In anything that lives and breathes

Without love I'd have anger / I wouldn't believe in the right to stand here

Without love I wouldn't believe - I couldn't believe in you

And I wouldn't believe in me Without love / I believe in love

And after Elton John rendered this standing ovation song, a big billboard flashed on the screen with these words: "Love cures!"

I will not do a survey of how many of you pray. It is your personal choice. Prayer takes in many forms. It could be through words or songs or a piece of art that make one conscious of the world, others and God. I believe that God or what God stands for is present in every moment of experience, not as a coercive external force, determining everything that happens without our input, but as an epiphany moment within the events of our lives, luring us toward healing, wholeness, and beauty. Within this multitude of constantly changing factors, God is moving, shaping, guiding, energizing, and providing the best possibilities for health and wholeness, given the current situation. Prayer awakens us to God's deep presence and enables us to live out God's vision, to a greater or lesser degree, in our lives. Prayer is a matter of call and response.

We call on God, the divine, the holy to strengthen us and we respond with our actions, with our love.

James pictures the church as the place where prayer and singing go hand in hand. “Is any among you suffering? Let him pray. Is any cheerful? Let him sing praises.” It’s a place where people confess their sins to one another and are restored, where people visit the sick and pray for them, where people are cheerful and sing for joy. Our prayers can transform our lives and the world. Prayer truly can make a difference for us and for those for whom we pray. I’m sure some of us do not believe in the power of prayer but I’m sure many if not all of us believe in the power of love. So let our prayers be prayers of love. That is the prayer of faith. So be it. Amen.