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**“Last Words”  
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth**

**September 27, 2009**

**Numbers 11:4–6, 10–16, 24–29; Psalm 124; James 5:13–20; Mark 9:38–41**

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Back in the 60's and 70's,

I recall a TV game-show named, “You Don't Say”.

Hosted by Tom Kennedy, the show was a contest between two celebrity teams,

in which one team member would try to get his or her teammate

to say the name of a famous person,

without mentioning a designated key word.

It was an approach/avoidance kind of game,

like walking on Swiss cheese without stepping in a hole,

where everyone would dance all around that key word,

knowing that they would receive demerits if it fell from the lips

of either party during the contest.

The concluding words of each show, voiced by the host, would be this:

*Remember, it's not what you say that counts; it's what you don't say.*

The text we have read today from James are his concluding words;

the last words of his epistle.

Last words usually are the most important words of a conversation,

and often carry great weight.

They are a “head's up” to us to listen and pay special attention

to what this person has to say to us.

Often they are the culmination of a person's thought process;

the centrifuged summation of a person's intent.

Throughout his letter, James has been talking about the power of speech, and most of his focus has been on practicing tactfulness:

swallowing one's words, biting one's tongue, zipping one's lips,  
in other words, as a Christian, "what you don't say".

James reminds his readers to be "quick to listen,  
slow to speak, and slow to anger" (1: 19).

He uses the image of a horse guided by bit in its mouth and rein  
to encourage believers to "keep a tight rein on one's tongue",  
as we continue to work for the welfare of widows and orphans.

Later he uses the image of a ship guided by its very small rudder,  
or a forest set ablaze by a very small spark, to encourage  
believers to practice praise with our speech,  
but to avoid cursing or boasting like the plague.

Inappropriate speech has the power to steer our ship  
straight up the river Styx, James might say,  
or to rain down fire and brimstone upon the forests of our lives,  
or to spur our steed straight down the road to perdition.

You get the message.

But here in his last words, in this final chapter, James takes a different tact.

The words that we DON'T say, are penultimate, according to James;

the words that we DO say, are what's ultimate:

and these ultimate words are the prayers uttered by the faithful,  
addressed to God.

These prayerful praising words are the stuff of speech  
which James wholeheartedly endorses.

"Is anyone in trouble?" James says, "That person should pray."

"Is anyone happy? Let that person sing songs of praise."

I am reminded here of Luther's quoting of Augustine,

that singing is "praying twice", or prayer twice deepened.

"Is anyone one sick?" James asks,

"Let that person call upon the elders of the church

to come and pray over you and anoint you with oil

in the name of the Lord."

"If that person has sinned, he or she will be forgiven."

An ancient liturgy of the Christian church, the liturgy of St. James,

the oldest complete form of the divine liturgy,

dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century,

includes this intercession for the sick and infirm:

"Remember, Lord, those in old age and infirmity, those who are sick, ill, or troubled by unclean spirits, for their speedy healing and salvation by you, their God..." (Don Saliers. *Worship and Spirituality*, p. 69)

Trouble, happiness, sickness, sin, drought or flood, self-deception:

all are fodder for prayer.

For the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective, James says,

for rescuing, for rejoicing, for healing, for forgiving,

for changing the forecast, for saving, for bringing back,

for covering a multitude of sins.

And here James stops. Here James reins in his galloping steed.

And in these final words, his call to prayer,

I am reminded of some of the prominent figures of the Bible,

whose last words have been cast as prayer:

the last words of Moses, who prayed an unselfish blessing upon the twelve

tribes of Israel before he died, not knowing that his journey

would end just shy of complete (Deut. 33-34) -

seeing the promised land, yet never laying foot on its soil;

the last words of David, who prayed to Yahweh, the Rock of Israel,

the covenant-maker, to the One who empowers and enables

leaders to rule righteously,  
like light at sunrise, like brightness after rain (2 Samuel 23: 1-7);  
and the last words of Jesus in Mark's Gospel, uttered from the cross,  
a lament from Psalm 22, which says,  
"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34)  
But what Jesus doesn't say; what remains unspoken is the rest of the psalm –  
"for he has not despised or disdained  
the suffering of the afflicted one,  
he has not hidden his face from him  
but has listened to his cry for help." (Psalm 22: 24)

And in James' last words I also hear  
echoes of Paul's admonition to the Thessalonians,  
to "pray without ceasing". (1 Thess. 5:17)

There is an astonishing piece of artwork  
in the basement bowels of Duke Hospital,  
if you happen to be paying attention or take time to notice,  
while rushing from the parking garage  
to squeeze yourself in one of the crowded elevators to the upper floors.  
It's a sculpture in wood by a former Duke art professor, Frank Smullin,  
called "The Meeting", evoked from oak,  
by means of a chain saw and chisel, the inscription says.  
It's a sculpture in the round  
of people bended and bowed over a bed-ridden patient.  
And it looks to me like they are laying hands on the patient.  
And it looks to me like they might be in a posture of intense prayer.  
One person in the sculpture remains unbent, unbowed, standing next to the bed,  
looking the other way,  
perhaps refusing to participate in such foolishness.  
Of course that might be my bias as a person of faith, viewing this work of art.

A person of science might look at the same scene and think  
that they are palpating the patient, or assessing his body temperature.  
The person standing to the side, not participating, looking the other way,  
might himself be praying;  
refusing to bow, to bend,  
to human knowledge and medical acumen  
as adequate means, in and of themselves, to heal.

Nevertheless, there is a meeting going on here:  
a meeting of faith-types and healthcare-types,  
a meeting of artist and subject,  
a meeting of hard wood and soft flesh,  
a meeting of human suffering and a desire to heal,  
a meeting of chisel and scalpel and intercession,  
a meeting of heaven and earth.

And I imagine Jesus viewing this piece of artwork and saying,  
"Anyone who is not an enemy, is an ally.  
And anyone who gives even a cup of water  
in my name is on our side, and God will take notice." (Mark 9: 39-41)

I can't help but read James' words, and look at Smullin's beautiful meeting  
of art and life,  
and not be reminded of one of our dearly beloved African members,  
Michael Mburu, who died very quickly in 2008,  
as a result of stomach cancer.

I can't help but be reminded  
of the meeting of science and faith on Michael's behalf,  
and how UNC Hospital took him in, no questions asked,  
as an immigrant patient without means to pay;  
and yet he was afforded most excellent care by the best of doctors.

And I can't help but be reminded  
of the meetings of our members, both African and American,  
who loved and cared for Michael,  
and who gathered in his home to pray for his welfare,  
who provided him with necessities  
and with good things that he could eat,  
who arranged for his care and transportation,  
and for companionship along his difficult journey.

And I remember, among others, Joseph Ngumi accompanying him  
to the hospital;

Anthony Kamau leading so many prayers;

Betsey Beach knitting while sitting with him in Hospice care;

Henry Njoroge speaking for Michael when he was wordless;

Mercy Ndambiri calling me the day he died;

Mal King helping sort out the legal details of his care;

Phyllis Kort accompanying his body and belongings

back to his wife and children in Kenya after his death;

our service here of Witness to the Resurrection and farewell

to a beloved deacon and church member.

Michael left this life surrounded by the best of science and prayer,  
as I would hope and wish for all of God's beloved children.

Don Saliers, Professor of Theology and Worship

at The Candler School of Theology,

speaks of prayer as solidarity.

He says, "Our lives are incomplete

until we learn solidarity with others who suffer,

who are pressed down, who are desolate, but also who rejoice.

Only in this way can we cease being alienated from our own

experience of these things.

Christian spirituality begins a deeper perception of the 'tragic sense of life'...  
but always as part of the journey toward God.

There can be no prayer without such radical identification;  
no true serving of others without praying for them;  
no true praying for them without sharing,  
literally sharing, their sorrows, griefs, burdens and joys."

(Saliers. *Worship and Spirituality*, p. 72)

In his last words, this is what James is calling us to be and to do:

pray-ers who pray in solidarity with others, in sorrow and in joy.  
He is reminding us of God's enlargement of the Spirit in the Numbers passage,  
so that its effect is not only upon their designated leader,  
but upon the 70 elders as well, in full measure.

James is calling all the ministers of the church, every single one of us,  
to be ministers to one another in the powerful and effective  
act of prayer.

James is calling on the priesthood of believers to remain active advocates  
of the place of prayer in the business of healing,  
and to not allow its diminution or secularization.

He is calling us to rein in our tongues in destructive ways,  
but to rain down God's power through prayer,  
in ways that lead to healing and peace,  
to forgiveness and wholeness, to happiness and praise.

And that is how James says good-bye to us. These are his last words.

This is his rightful meeting of faith and works: prayer.

Frederick Buechner reminds us that the word "good-bye" was once itself  
a prayer: "God be with you",

before the diminution and secularization of this salutation.

(Frederick Buechner. *Whistling in the Dark*, p. 60)

So really, every time we endure a parting from someone and say, "good-bye",  
we are sending them off with a prayer.

At the school bus, as we help our back-packed child up that first big step:

God be with you;

From the front door, as we watch our spouse back out of the driveway

and blow a kiss: God be with you;

At the hummingbird feeder, as we realize our summer ruby-throats

have taken leave to migrate south again: God be with you;

At the airport security entrance, as we embrace someone embarking

on a lengthy sojourn: God be with you;

At the hospital bedside as we bend and bow over a person who is ill:

God be with you;

At the font as we triple-time baptize a newborn, and again as we bid adieu

to someone whose baptism has been made complete in his or her death:

God be with you.

May the Lord watch over your coming in and going out, both now and

forevermore.

These are our last words. These are our ultimate words.

This is our meeting, our task, our prayer.

God be with you. Amen.