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James 5: 13 – 20
Matthew 11: 28 – 30

“Watching Over One Another In Love”

Biochemistry and cellular biology have always fascinated me. I remember discovering the biochemistry and nutrition abstracts section of the library at Pacific Union College at Deer Park when I served St. Helena UMC. This is the Seventh Day Adventist college and community up the hill from St. Helena.

Now I need to tell you I've never had any chemistry—but you don't really need chemistry to understand the conclusions of the research and the knowledge it imparts. So even though I didn't understand it all I still benefited enough to come away with a tremendous respect and excitement and hope for the future.

John Wesley would have loved this opportunity! He was a systems thinker—and through his mother Susanna, he appreciated medicine even publishing a little book of medicinal remedies.

I know without a doubt he would immediately appreciate the power of the cell to impact the entire body.

The cell. Have you ever considered how the whole of our bodies is made up of a gazillion cells?

What happens in the cell that is so important for our well-being? Can you tell me? (Wait for response) [nutrition, chemical exchanges that make up the body's “electricity,” the ability to replicate itself, cleanse the body with a transfer of fluids---, even the blood is full of cells, right?—Red blood cells make the blood red and carry oxygen which is actually blue but turns red when it hits the air...)

Anyway, the point is this: The cell is where it happens—where the very necessary things that nourish, heal and energize us. We are only as healthy as our cellular structure.

In our Wesleyan heritage, we see how John Wesley organized the first Methodists into societies and then into smaller class meetings and then into even smaller pairs called “bans.”

Like cells! Each with a different function but all with the same purpose: the health of the body.

Both bodies!

What bodies? The individual believer and the body of the church—Christ's Body. Taking this analogy one step further, every one of us who are a part of this church, we are like individual cells of Christ's Body, our congregation. So, our church's spiritual health depends on the spiritual health of each believer.

Wesley referred to taking care of our spiritual health as watching over one another in love through being accountable for our discipleship. Accountable to and for other believers to assist and encourage one another in staying in right relationship with our Creator and with our neighbor.

He referred to the ways in which we stay connected to God as the Means of Grace.

The Means of Grace are something we've just pretty much short changed over the years: like getting into the habit of skipping a meal or waking up one day and discovering fast food is making up a majority of your lunches.

You've heard me say before how good we are at engaging in Acts of Mercy. You've heard me say we do the Acts of Mercy real well: serve, help others, work hard, give to those in need.

But we don't take a lot of time to give to ourselves! To nourish ourselves as we do our bodies at the cellular level. To heal ourselves or to take personal inventory and gain insight into how we need to change.

The Means of Grace includes prayer, conversation with other Christians about God's will for our lives, scripture reading. The one means of grace we are very regular about is taking communion. And I am sure a lot of you read do daily devotions.

But as far as I can tell, only the Wednesday morning bible study weekly engages in prayer together.

They have a ministry of intercessory prayer. The prayer requests we receive in worship on the yellow cards are collected up and lifted up again in prayer every Wednesday morning. But still this is not about an intentional

time of examining one’s relationship with God in the company of other believers.

That means the vast majority of us are getting by on fast food faith — we soldier on solo not reaping the benefits or the growth that comes in seeking God’s will together.

We need to hear the good news of Jesus who invites us with these words:

“Come to me all you who are weary of carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

And we need to take to heart with Jesus words the teaching of James to pray for one another, with one another—because, James tells us, the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

If when we are weak and wandering—as James puts it—when the world overwhelms us and we are not able to discern the right way to go—other believers who, watching over us in love—can bring us back—help us regain our balance and our perspective.

When John Wesley was at Oxford University, he and his brother Charles started a small group that met regularly—called the Holy Club. Its purpose was to watch over one another in love and to covenant together to engage in acts of mercy.

Because we are so much better at the latter, what I hear the Spirit calling us to do is begin nourishing this congregation at the cellular level.

I had a very powerful experience while I was in Korea with Methodist practice of watching over one another in love. We were all divided up and sent out into the city of Incheon—a city of 7 million people next door to Seoul, the capital of Korea which is eleven million.

Peter, the missionary responsible for us, assigned us to two women members of the congregation of the Bupyung Methodist Church. We drove into Incheon to a thirty story apartment building—everyone lives in these very high

apartment buildings. We got on the elevator and went up to the 17th floor to her home.

Waiting for us were three other women and two small children. These women meet each and every week as a cell or small group.

We removed our shoes and sat on small mats on the floor. Because we were their guests they had a small, low table ready for tea and fruit refreshments for after the meeting.

The leader of the group began the meeting with a hymn. A hymn we knew and sang along with them in English: *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*—but not at the pace we are used to singing it. No, this was very up beat and joyous!

Then the group leader opened with prayer to which the whole group concluded with a loud “Amen!” The opening prayer was followed by a brief scripture and an inspirational reading, (sometimes a teaching or instruction for the Christian life). No discussion followed. The members sat quietly taking in the reading and personally reflecting on it.

This was followed by each one going around the circle and sharing. The leader then asked the person sharing about where she needed to find God or where she did she find God in these circumstance. The sharer responded and asked for others input. One or two spoke up.

Then the leader said, “We pray to the Lord,” and the whole group responded with a loud—LOUD—affirming “Amen!”

And so it went around the circle of five women. They closed their time together praying the Lord’s Prayer in unison.

In less than an hour this group had watched over one another in love, availing themselves of Christian conversation, encouragement and challenge, scripture and prayer. They left fortified, strengthened and loved to face another week of busy working lives, family, ill health, personal struggles, and efforts to bring the word of God to other non-Christians. Most took public transportation home or on to do

grocery shopping and other errands as it was a Saturday morning.

It was very moving and it was very convicting. Every member of the Bupyung Methodist Church is assigned to a cell group in a geographical area close to where they live or work. It is a part of what it means to be a member of their church. The pastor provides the inspiration or teaching for all the cell groups. This was an amazingly unifying experience backed up every morning at 5 a.m. with early morning prayer.

I prayed a lot about this experience. Today I invite you to be a part of a very small group—a cell group—where in the confidential confines of three or four others you can be watched over in love through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, be fortified in your daily walk and seek and discern God’s will in the daily journey of Christian discipleship.

It’s at the level of sharing, prayer and care that we become our best selves—it’s at the place of trust and the pause that permits insight that we hear God speaking and can regain our perspective, our direction.

Its here that we come to know at a very deep level the love of God for us through the love that grows within the group. Its here where God in Christ can challenge us to deeper commitment and faithful lives.

Christian writer, Dallas Willard is quotes “E. Stanley Jones who” said that we inoculate the world with a mild form of Christianity so that it will be immune to the real thing.

The aim of such inoculation is security — not security in Christ, but security from Christ and from having to rely on him and the shape of his kingdom to give meaning and significance to our lives.”¹

The power of the Church to transform the world rests in the power of prayer and discipling. It is in our intentional efforts to engage in spiritual

formation that our character and the character of the whole church is infused with Jesus. As he says to us, “Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, I am in the midst of them.”

People, let us gather in his name as the cells of his Body so we may not only receive but be more effective in our daily witness. You have two index cards. Write the word “cell” and your name on one card if you will accept this invitation be a part of a cell group that would meet twice a month. Save the other card. We will use it in a moment.

Imagine what the Spirit of God might do through us with the majority of the congregation participating in cell groups!

Now imagine one more thing: Imagine a church led by a group of disciples committed to watching over one another in love; seeking God’s will for the direction of the church, and using a process of discernment, scripture and prayer to provide us with spiritual guidance for our mission here at Memorial.

The bible refers to such persons as elders.

I am referred to as an ordained elder — someone set aside by the community and the nudgings of the Holy Spirit to dedicate my life to enabling and facilitating the ministry of the disciplined—all of you.

Don’t you think it is a bit strange there is only one elder in a congregation charged with the responsibility of spiritual oversight of the whole mission? Jesus modeled another way.

Jesus went aside, prayed and then selected twelve from among his disciples to be apostles—elders—spiritual leaders whom he prayed with and taught and led. They in turn went out to lead the people.

For years we’ve governed ourselves by Robert’s Rules of Order in a board or council. That is a good vehicle for making decisions for any organization. But we are not just any organization.

We are a church—an expression of the body of Christ in this place whose core purpose for being is to make disciples—bring others to faith in Christ—and be in ministry to the world as

¹ —Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 90.

Jesus was—with the poor, with the hurting, with the marginalized, with the needy, with the grieving and ill and dying.

And as such our leader is God in Christ. He is the source of our being, our guidance and our power. It makes sense that we are structured in such a way as to make his will our first priority.

What if we had a circle of twelve elders in this church for spiritual direction? If we did, who would you name as a spiritually mature person or persons to serve as an elder within this community?

I want you to spend a few moments in prayer and think about the people in this community who have influenced your faith or whom you look to for spiritual maturity. Who has the well being of this community as their first priority? Who gives their time—to whom do you turn for prayer or a word of wisdom? Or knowledge? Who do you hold in esteem?

Take the time right now and then please write the word “elder” and the name or names of such persons on the other white card. Now pass your cards to the end of the aisle and ushers please collect these during the hymn.

Tonight at the annual church conference at 4:00 p.m. I will be bringing a proposal for the creation of an Elder’s Circle. I hope you will take the time to be present and participate.

If the church conference approves this proposal, the names you submit will be used in the process of selecting the Elders.

Finally, if you feel called to an elder please speak with me. And do not be bashful about this—pay attention to the nudging of the Holy Spirit calling you. This is no time for false humility. Okay?

Dallas Willard, whom I quote earlier, declares he “will have none of restricting redemption to the mere forgiveness of sins when Jesus had something even more radical in mind: the “impartation of a life,” the communication of how to live a new kind of life. This newness of life involves forgiveness of sins and Jesus’ death... (but it) also involved much more besides” - the

transformation of human life, (THIS) is at the heart of the life of Christ (36).

It is that he lived and the way he lived that gave rise to the courageous and transforming early church.²

Jesus invites us to journey with them and with him on this way of transforming life. Let the people say loudly, “Amen!”

² Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).