

**Scripture for Sermon, “A Community of Prayer”
Saugatuck Church
August 12, 2007**

I Thessalonians 5:12-20

But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit.

James 5:13-16

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

**Sermon, “A Community of Prayer”
Saugatuck Church,
August 12, 2007**

We at Saugatuck are a praying congregation. We honor the power of prayer each Sunday, particularly through the prayers of the people. Each of our meetings opens and closes with prayer. Prayer is central for the Women’s Spirituality group and for the Wednesday afternoon prayer group. We know the amazing power and comfort of prayer. My message this morning is actually very simple. I’m encouraging us to strengthen and deepen our prayer life both individually and as a congregation, particularly as we go through these major transitions which we are facing as a church. As we strengthen our living prayer, we will be responding to the advice given to us by our Scripture this morning. Let’s go back to the Scripture for a moment.

First Thessalonians is probably the oldest book in the New Testament. It is written by the Apostle Paul to a church which he had founded in Thessalonica, a thriving commercial city situated on both land and sea trading routes and the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. Written in 50 or so BCE, 20 or more years before any of the Gospels were written, it is Paul's letter of encouragement and advice to a group of people whom he obviously loved and for whom he regularly prayed. In the beginning of the letter he speaks about the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of these new Christians. In verse four he writes, "For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction..." This verse and our chosen reading speak to my heart, to my own personal experience.

For 30 years I have been quietly teaching about the power of prayer, about the power of the Holy Spirit which can be present in our lives. I have taught classes and workshops in various churches in our surrounding communities. I teach ways in which we can open ourselves more completely to the presence of God, whatever name you wish to use for the guiding power of love and wisdom which surrounds us all of the time. God is always with us, the Holy Spirit is at work among us. But we have to learn to be more open to that power. We need to explore and let go of the myriad ways we do not trust God's love. It is actually a life time of spiritual growth work. It's how we grow as Christians, grow not just in what we think but in how we respond to life events emotionally, physically, spiritually. In these words of Paul, as he ends his letter with final words of advice, he sketches out behaviors which witness to the presence of Christ at work in the community. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit." The advice is clear: grow in your prayerful openness to the presence of God among us.

Our second Scripture of the morning comes from the book of James. Christian tradition claims it was written by James the brother of Jesus who was the head of the church in Jerusalem. Paul was the missionary, James staid in Jerusalem, the first center of Christian growth. Recent scholarship questions whether this book was actually written by James. Perhaps it is a collection of sayings compiled by a later author. Whatever its historical source, its spiritual advice has echoed down through the centuries as a call to communal prayer. "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the in the name of the Lord." This verse also speaks to me.

For 30 years I have been teaching about the power of communal prayer as we reach out to those who are in need, in need physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. Prayer is powerful medicine. I believe that the healing, loving presence of the Holy Spirit can flow through our hands as we touch another with an intent to heal. It can flow through our focused thoughts as we pray for someone who is not physically present with us. This is a belief which many of you share.

Now, let me shift gears for a moment. I believe in the power of prayer but it is often difficult for me to really believe it!! There are at least two stumbling blocks for me, and probably for most of us. First, what do we do with the situations in which we earnestly pray for healing, for example, and, instead, the one for whom we pray gets worse and perhaps dies? The second stumbling block is more subtle. Our culture soaks our minds with the belief that hard science is the royal road to truth. In the science we grew up with, thoughts can not effect physical things. Therefore, prayer, which is a form of thought, can't have an impact on anyone else.

Many pages can be written about both of these stumbling blocks. In fact, in a book I've written about healing, I have included many such pages!! The quick answer, however, to the first stumbling block—what happens when our prayers don't seem to be answered—is that God is with us, working in and through us, even when “no” seems to be the answer to our immediate request. I know this answer well. For 60 years I have lived with a disability from which I would have been delighted to be healed!!!

The second stumbling block around science is not so large as we think. The new physics, the new science, takes us into spooky realms of reality in which thought has power even at a distance. Some writers call it “non-local mind,” meaning, of course, that my mind is not just located within the physical space which my body/brain occupies. Science and prayer at this level are no longer at war with each other.

But I still struggle with my conviction that prayer is powerful. For me, as I think it is for many people, it's personal experience which is the most convincing evidence I have that prayer is a highly valuable activity. Let me tell you some personal stories.

In August of 2002, a routine mammogram showed suspicious spots in both of my breasts. I was stunned. Many of you have been through processes like this: a routine medical test suddenly breaks open your life or a symptom, which you've assumed was nothing, suddenly becomes something. Even if you personally have not had such an experience, you have been present with friends or loved ones as they go through these processes. For me it took three and a half months with tests and then

waiting, more tests and more waiting, to finally determine that a double mastectomy was the best way to treat the cancer in my breasts.

Shortly after the suspicious mammograms, the question of “with whom did I want to share this information” hit me full force. Close friends, of course. But did my strong, independent self want to be publicly vulnerable? Cancer is a community disease. Knowledge would leave me publicly exposed with a disease that seems to have plague proportions. Because it is life threatening, mention the word “cancer” and there is almost always an immediate reaction of fear on the part of the listener. So how “open” did I want to be? Did I want to risk having all that fear from others around me? I had enough of my own with which to cope.

Within a few days the decision became clear. Because I believe in prayer, because I wanted the prayer support of others, I would “go public” with the cancer diagnosis and invite others to join me prayerfully in my process. So the word went out. I made an inner commitment—even though it was difficult for my independent self—to share the process as completely as I could. This choice—and it was just that, I could have chosen otherwise—opened me to receive the prayers, the love, which began to flow toward me. And my “job” was to take it in, to open my now exposed heart to the love and prayers of others.

It wasn’t always easy. There were times I just wanted to hide in a deep hole and pull a rock over to block the opening. How could I allow this much nakedness of heart? Questions surfaced. I don’t deserve the prayer, the love—signs of guilt and feelings of inadequacy. My self image and my image in the community is of helper, rescuer—how can I tolerate the change into the one who needs help? It is much too frightening to be this unguarded. Open hearts are potentially wounded hearts. I was letting go of my life-long, subtle but definite ability to protect my heart from others. My commitment to openness was firm but it was not always easy.

By the time of surgery, prayers were coming from many people. And the results of all this prayer? I felt like a blanket of love surrounded me every step of the way. I was never alone, not just physically, but in my emotions and my soul. I could feel the communal support. And, perhaps, there were what we might call some miracles as well.

Let me tell you some miracle stories. A simple definition of “miracle” is an event which breaks the rules of our ordinary expectations. It “colors outside the lines.” Be aware that I don’t use the word “miracle” casually. There are many possible reasons why certain events occur. I am trained in philosophy and logic and understand these options. And yet, as I went through cancer, several things happened that deserve the word miracle.

The most amazing miracle of my recovery is that I had absolutely no pain after surgery. I, having no previous experience, didn't realize this was unusual until the medical personnel's continuous questions about my lack of need for pain medication alerted me to the fact that I wasn't reacting "normally," that my experience was "outside the lines" of expectancy. My surgeon finally decided I was just stoical, feeling pain but over-riding it. But the fact is I had no pain—zip, nada. Was this the result of prayer or of excellent surgery or some other cause? We can, of course, prove nothing here in a strictly scientific way. There is no control group. But for me, living at the epicenter of all the wonderful prayer, I see it as a miracle of God's grace.

Second amazing story. A mastectomy usually affects arm movement. My arms were never affected at all. I had normal arm movement even in the recovery room. If this was a "miracle," as I believe it was, it was an especially important one for me. Since I cannot walk, every move from wheelchair to toilet to bed involves lifting my whole body by pressing downward on my arms. If my arms had been affected, my activities, my recovery, would have been severely restricted.

A third miracle, if you will. One day in the hospital my bronchial area became very congested. This is scary for me because polio has affected my diaphragm and chest muscles, hence my breathing. It sometimes takes me weeks to clear congestion after a cold. The friend who was tending the e-mail list sent out a request to focus prayer on my lungs. The next day the congestion was gone. Several nights later my throat was sore again. This time Sue put her hands on my neck and by morning the soreness was gone. These stories are startling even to me who believes in the possibility of prayer influenced miracles.

The support of my praying friends surrounded me as I went through chemotherapy. Before each session, I emailed my prayer family, as I was calling them. They prayed for me the night before the session, the day of chemotherapy and the day after. As I would try to settle down the night before each injection of the chemicals, I could feel the surrounding prayerful support of my friends. I had very few side effects from the chemotherapy.

The greatest miracle of all was the deepening of my own faith—trust in a loving God, trust in the works of the Holy Spirit flowing through a loving, caring community of praying people. Those experiences opened wide my belief that prayer at a distance does indeed have an impact on the person who is the blessed recipient of those prayers. We are truly in prayer a connected community of love, blessed by the power of the Holy Spirit. We become what the church of Jesus Christ is meant to be.

Let's go back to our Scripture. As our congregation goes through these transition times, all of us can support each other with prayer. As Kim Mathias said last week, we can pray for those who are taking responsibility to act on our behalf as they help to shepherd us through these next weeks and months. To repeat some of Paul's words: "But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord...esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves." All of us can be directly and constantly involved with our process as we pray for the discernment provided by the Holy Spirit to guide us all. We are blessed. Amen.

Go in peace, living more deeply through prayer into the life of Jesus Christ who, in the Holy Spirit, brings us power, love, healing, and a peace that passes all understanding. Amen.