

We've Got You Covered

In the name of him who has placed God's Spirit upon us, dear friends in Christ: Today's Epistle lesson made me think of a phrase that you often hear while watching war films. There will be a scene in which a group of soldiers are in a firefight, advancing on the enemy. They're maneuvering forward just a few men at a time, trying to find shelter from enemy fire wherever they can, behind ruined buildings, tree stumps, in bomb craters, whatever, all the time moving forward in a kind of hopscotch way: first this fire team, then another one, and then a third group, as together they're closing in on the enemy position. And each time, when it's one of the fire team's turn to move forward, the other teams will say to them, "Okay, go! *We've got you covered.*" What they mean is that they're going to lay down an intense hail of suppressing fire that will force the enemy to put their heads down and not shoot back while the moving team is out in the open and exposed.

Interestingly enough, it's the same thing you might expect your insurance agent to say to you. At least, if you've suffered some kind of loss, you *hope* your agent will say, "Don't worry. We've got you covered." It means that the company is going to reimburse you for the loss and pay for the damages. In both cases, the phrase "We've got you covered" conveys a message of assurance. It means when you are vulnerable, you're going to be protected by a larger group of people. There are many looking out for the good of the few ... or the one.

This is precisely what St. James is setting forth in today's Epistle. He's saying that the Church of Jesus Christ is a family that looks out for the good of its members. There is a collective protection in which we share. As we journey through this life and face its trials and hardships, we don't go alone. We're in this together. And so when it happens that anyone of us suffers loss, or is weak, vulnerable, or exposed to danger, the rest of us ought to be able to say to that person, "Don't worry. We've got you covered."

What this means is that there's no need for any of us to bear our afflictions alone. As members of the body of Christ, we share each other's burdens. This is why James says, "Is someone among you suffering?" Have they lost a loved one? Did they lose their job? Was their home damaged or destroyed? Is some other crisis crashing down on them? If so, let him pray." And when James says this, he doesn't mean go home, kneel by your bed, and silently mouth the words or just think them in your head. No, the custom in James' day was to go to the temple and to speak your prayers aloud to the Lord. The equivalent in our day is when someone asks me to include their concerns in our prayers during worship. Yes, the Lord hears and answers your prayers no matter how or where you pray them, but part of the point of *public* prayer is that others hear and join in praying your petitions also. And it often happens that part of the Lord's answer to your prayer is in the response of the other members of the church. The body of Christ takes care of itself through the loving acts of kindness of its members. We can share part of the load you bear, provide material relief, help you get back on your feet again, speak words of comfort and encouragement, and if nothing else, place a brotherly or sisterly arm across your shoulders and cry with you. Believe it or not, sometimes even that is a great help. But we can't do it if we don't know what your problems are. Too often, out of the sense that "no one wants to be bothered by me and my problems", we try to go it alone; making ourselves even more vulnerable to the attacks of Satan who likes to use our problems as occasions to shake our faith.

But it's not only our afflictions that we should share. James asks, "Is someone cheerful? Has the Lord blessed you in some way? Do you have occasion to be filled with joy? Let that person sing a psalm of praise." This is the flip side of it. Just as you should allow the family of Christ to cover you in your times of sorrow, so also you should let the church rejoice with you in your glad times. Let your joy be contagious. It does us all good to see God's gracious hand at work when any one of us is blessed. It's a great encouragement. And it may be part of helping to cover someone else who's down. So, by all means, share your song of praise – and let the church sing it with you.

James then turns his attention to one who for health reasons can't bring their prayer to the assembly of the saints. "Is someone sick?" he asks, "Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up." There's a lot to digest there. First, in this context, when James says "elders" he means primarily the pastors of the church. We use the word differently in our day; and there's no reason that we couldn't include those whom we appoint as elders in the congregation to go with the pastor and pray for those who are sick. The point is that when someone can't come to the church, the church through its representatives goes to them. They bring God's Word to them, and they pray, asking the Lord to deliver the person from their illness.

What follows, though, is one of the most abused passages in the Bible. When James says, "The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick and raise him up", this is not an absolute guarantee that if we pray for someone who's sick, or that if we have enough faith when we pray, that the person is going to recover. It may happen, of course, if it's the Lord's will; but the fact of the matter is that sometimes it is the Lord's will *not* to heal a person. It may be that he intends the sickness to end in death, and that he's using the illness to bring the person home to glory. Or it may be that the illness is a cross he intends the person to carry according to his infinitely good and wise plan, and that his goal is to give the person the faith and strength to carry it. We don't know. But we are invited to pray, knowing that we have a loving Father who for Christ's sake hears our prayers and does what's best for us – even when the answer to our prayer is "no" or "not now". And so we do pray for those who are sick, entrusting them to the Lord's loving hands, and believing that he will do for them what is best. And praying with and over them, we commend them to the Lord who covers them with his mercy.

And it's here that the most important part of what James says is usually forgotten. Regarding the person who is sick and being prayed for he goes on to say, "And if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven." That *is* a guarantee. It often happens that when serious illness strikes, the sick person has time and cause to reflect on their relationship with the Lord. And whenever someone examines that relationship honestly, they're going to see sin in their lives. That is to say, physical illness can help us to see our spiritual health problems. And it's far more important that we address the latter. These bodies of ours are all going to die and decay no matter how hard or faithfully we pray; but the soul will live forever. And that's why it's vital that we keep our souls cleansed and faithfully ready to depart when the Lord calls. So, when the pastor is there praying for the sick person at their home or in the hospital, it's an occasion for the pastor to hear the person's confession of sin. It allows them to pour out of their hearts the burdens of guilt they are carrying, and to hear those words of faith-creating comfort: that for Christ's sake, who died on the cross for all your sins, you are forgiven in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Clinging to that truth, the person will be saved and raised up whether their body is healed or not. In the end, that's all that matters. And so in this way too, the church covers those who are sick in the robe of Christ's righteousness.

And James reminds us that this is not just for those who are physically ill. He continues, “Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.” He’s telling us to cover each other with the most important covering the church has: the blood of Christ. Too many of us walk around every day staggering under a burden of guilt, guilt over sins committed long ago, shameful secrets that we’re afraid to confront, and ongoing, habitual sins that we don’t know how to escape or haven’t got the strength to overcome. Jesus came – he suffered and died – to give us rest; but we insist on trying to carry these loads ourselves. It’s madness. And it’s so unnecessary. Jesus has given us the means to be free of these burdens. It’s confession and absolution – which we ought to be able to do with any member of the body of Christ. Of course, this is pastor’s particular calling: to be ears that hear your confession and the mouth through which Christ speaks his word of forgiveness that covers sin and creates and strengthens faith.

It strikes me as odd: many people are afraid to go to the pastor to confess their sins. They think, “He’ll think I’m a terrible person.” That’s not true. I already know that you’re a terrible person. I am too. That’s how I know – that, and it’s what God’s Word clearly says. It’s funny: in college I studied civil engineering, and specifically managing water resources – which is a nice way to say dealing with sewage. Back then I figured I would eventually find work designing sewage treatment plants. It seemed like it would be a steady job. I mean, wherever there are people, there’s going to be sewage, and someone is going to have to deal with it. And the thing about sewage is that it’s nasty and it stinks – I don’t care who produces it. So it is the human heart and what comes out of it; and that’s what I deal with now. I guess it means that I’ll still have a steady job. But more to the point, it is never going to surprise me to hear that you are a sinner and that your sin stinks. I already know that. I’ve been called here to be Christ’s agent to set you free of whatever burden of guilt you may be carrying. I’ve been called to cover you with Christ. Make use of the gifts that Christ has given you in the church to keep you covered.

And then there are those who stray from the truth. Maybe they allow themselves to be deceived by false doctrine, and turn away from the faith that saves in Christ to trust in their own works and merit. Maybe they fall into a faith-destroying sin, one that involves the willful rejection of God’s Law and they stubbornly refuse to repent. Or maybe they just fall away from the means of grace: they neglect the Word and Sacraments by which faith is sustained, and like a red hot coal removed from the others that are burning together in a fire and is set aside by itself, their faith becomes dim, grows cold, and eventually goes out altogether. However it happens, James says that we in the church ought to have these people covered too.

He writes, “My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

It is without question one of the hardest things we do keep one another covered. With the other things James has mentioned thus far, we take for granted the cooperation of the person who needs to be covered. People suffering hardship, who are sick, or who are feeling the oppression of their guilt *want* the intervention and the covering of the church. They appreciate the help they get from the other members of the body of Christ. But those who wander away from the truth in one of the ways I’ve described typically don’t want the church’s assistance. It’s the church and it’s truth that they’re rejecting and running from.

But that does not mean we’re to abandon them to their own devices. No, rather we are to recognize that they have been deceived. They cannot see the truth. And we can’t expect

them to find their own way back to the truth anymore than we would expect a blind person to drive a car from Clarinda to Council Bluffs. They need help. They need the help of the church and the people in it who have the light of Christ. And so with patience, with prayer, and with persistence, it's the duty of each one of us to do what we can to rescue them from the darkness – to rescue them from hell.

And yes, I know what this means. It means being called judgmental. It means being called intolerant. It means being called all kinds of horrible names and being told to mind your own business. It might mean losing a valued friendship or putting a icy chill on a family relationship. But that's what Christian love does. Like Christ when he died for sinners like us, it suffers the abuse. It accepts the hatred and ridicule of the world. It goes all the way – and beyond – in the hope of turning even one sinner back and returning them to the covering of the church. As I said in the beginning of this message, in the church we ought to be able to say to each other, "We've got you covered" even when you fall. And very often it takes the collective effort of the body of Christ, all of us working together to rescue someone who has fallen away.

And, of course, in all this what St. James is describing is the ideal. He's setting forth the communal covering and protection we should be striving to achieve together in our congregation. The question we have to ask is: Compared to this ideal, how are we doing? In response, even if we were to be most charitable in our evaluation, I think we'd have to say that at best our track record is one of hit and miss. Sometimes we get it right. But I confess that I personally have failed many times in my responsibility to cover you and others in rendering assistance, in prayer, in bringing God's Word of grace and forgiveness, and in seeking to restore those who have fallen. And for my failures I beg your forgiveness. Pray for me that I may be more faithful to my calling. And if you too acknowledge that you have been less than faithful in your responsibility to serve others in the church in these ways, then allow me to fulfill part of my calling by announcing to you God's grace and forgiveness in Christ Jesus who atoned for the sins of the whole world. And together let's resolve to move forward, relying on God's mercy and trusting in his love to give us the wisdom, the will, and the means to be the kind of church that can truly say to all of our members, "We've got you covered." in Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!