**A Formula for Healing**

**Text: James 5:13**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**World Communion Sunday**

**October 7, 2018**

Many years ago, the World Council of Churches produced a poster that depicts Jesus embracing the world. You have it before you on the screen.

I just love that image. It illustrates so well John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

“God so loved the world.” The *whole* world. Not just you and me. Not just the United States. Not just the western world; the *whole* world. That’s why Jesus came into the world, that’s why the Church quickly spread throughout the known 1st century world, that’s why the Risen Christ said to his disciples, “Go into *all* the world, baptizing in the name of the Creator, the Savior and the Sustainer of us all” (Matthew 28:19, paraphrased).

God loves the *whole* world. And this…this is the longest table in the world. There is room here for everyone. I served a church in Canada that was divided between white folks, folks from Jamaica, and folks from the Philippines. The white folks were trying hard to hang on to power, but men and women from the Jamaican and Filipino constituencies were moving into leadership positions, and one Sunday one of Elders from Jamaica was serving at the Table. In his prayer over the bread, Wesley Fuller described this Lord’s Table as the longest table in the world. And the image that has stuck with me ever since that Sunday is a Table stretching from here to infinity, with people from every imaginable race seated together, each in their own ethnic garb, and Jesus in the middle, blessing the bread and the cup.

I can’t think of a better image for this day; this World Communion Sunday. I can’t think of a better image for this day, and this time. With so many nations putting up barriers to refugees and immigrants and those whom they deem “the other;” so many nations – or at least political movements within those nations – circling the wagons and trying to keep others out, Jesus is inviting people in. “Come to me, *all* who carry heavy burdens,” he says, “and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

This is the longest table in the world. There’s room here for everyone.

What there isn’t room for here is fear. And it’s fear that keeps others out. It’s fear that tempts us to strike out at others. It’s fear that causes us to close in on ourselves. It’s fear that causes so much suffering.

“Are any among you suffering? They should pray.” That begins to make sense when you think about how much suffering is caused by fear. When we attack others out of fear we contribute to their suffering; when we close in on ourselves and exclude others – even excluding the love that others are offering us – we contribute to our *own* suffering; sometimes to the point of sometimes making ourselves sick.

“Are any of you suffering? They should pray.” We should pray because if prayer does anything, it casts out fear. If prayer does anything - and it *does!* – it casts out the fear that causes people everywhere to hurt others, and to hurt themselves, and to create suffering.

The fear that fuels suffering is very much a matter of the head and the heart. It’s all in here. Fear is often a reaction not to *real* danger, but to *perceived* danger. We *imagine* that we’re threatened, we *imagine* that we’re under attack. And the thing about prayer is that it draws us into a place of such power and such calm that it *casts out* fear. Prayer draws us into a place of such love that rather than holding people at arm’s length or even striking out against them, we want to embrace them, and comfort them, and reassure them; whoever they are; however different they may seem from us.

I was on a prayer retreat one summer out in the Canadian Rockies. It’s easy to pray out there; all you have to do is lift-up your eyes to a mountain peak and you’re so touched by how awesome the Creator is that you can’t *help* but praise God.

I was on a prayer retreat because I was hurting, and I had some serious business to attend to. I was broken inside, and I’d broken some relationships, and of course it was everyone else’s fault. But on some deep level I must’ve known that it was at least 50% my fault, so I had some work to do. I needed to be alone with God in prayer.

I remember one day in particular. It was too cold and damp for a hike – and it’s when I’m hiking that I do some of my deepest praying – too cold and damp for a hike, so I sat in the lodge in front of a blazing fire, Bible in my lap, eyes closed, breathing deeply, and drifting into the stillness of prayer. In the silence – in the sweet solitude of that prayerful space – I moved into a layer of anger. Oh, I was *so* angry! And I sat with that anger; and gradually it started to dissipate. And then I moved deeper, into a layer of fear. And I had to sit with that fear, until the Holy Spirit – like the blazing fire before me – began to burn it away. And beneath all of that anger and all of that fear…there was an incredible fountain of forgiveness. And as it gushed forth, it washed away the lingering fear and the lingering anger and a whole lot of pain in the process and oh my goodness by the end of that week I felt *wonderful*. I can’t say that I was completely whole – none of us is fully healed until that day, beyond this world, when we see Jesus face-to-face – no, I was far from completely healed, but at least a lot of the broken pieces were coming together.

“Are any among you suffering? You should pray.” Are any among *us* suffering? *We* should pray. Prayer plus forgiveness equals healing. Not only for me, not only for you, not only for this community, but for the nation; for the world. Prayer plus forgiveness equals healing, and reconciliation. That’s the biblical formula for healing. One of them, anyway. In many families you sit down at the table for a meal, you pray, and then you eat. But for many folks in our nation and our world, I think we need to pray *first*. Because, when you’re angry enough, when you’re hurting enough, when you’re fearful enough…you have to pray, before we’re even *willing* to sit down at the table together.

Faith without works is dead. That’s the phrase from this Letter of James that we’ve repeated more than once in recent weeks. Faith without works is dead. Works without faith can cause death. But prayer nurtures that faith which ushers forth in good works. And there’s no better work than people joining hands and walking together as sisters and brothers. People of different nations. People of different races. People of different political persuasions. People, all of whom, are children of God.

Prayer plus forgiveness equals healing, and reconciliation. From such prayer comes peace. From such prayer comes light; the light of Christ burning within us. From such prayer comes the Christ reaching out through us, and embracing one another, and embracing the whole world. And this…this is Christ’s Table. The longest table in the world. There’s room here for everyone.