

## **From the Back to the Front Porch**

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The First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ  
Burlington, Vermont

### **James 5:13-20**

<sup>13</sup>*Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.* <sup>14</sup>*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 name of the Lord.* <sup>15</sup>*The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.* <sup>16</sup>*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.* <sup>17</sup>*Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.* <sup>18</sup>*Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.* <sup>19</sup>*My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another,* <sup>20</sup>*you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*

This morning I would like to preach on the subject From the Back Porch to the Front Porch. From the Back Porch to the Front Porch.

I live in a very nice town house development in the south side of town. My town house has a back deck or porch. I do like my back porch that includes two nice walls that offer me privacy from my neighbors. On each of our walled off individual back porches, we each have our own grill, table and chairs and a few flowerpots in a nice private secluded space.

A short distance from my town house is another sort of development. In this neighborhood, there are older homes with big front porches. The front porches look out on a common green or play area. Everyone can see everyone else and keep an eye on the kids riding their bikes or throwing a Frisbee. It has a neighborly feel to it where you can imagine a collection of neighbors plus grandmas and grandpas, uncles and aunts, moms, dads, and family friends young and old who congregate on those front porches. It's a distinctly public space.

It feels very friendly. To be honest, I prefer back porch to front porch living sometimes. I like my privacy. I remember interviewing for a church in Iowa just out of seminary. As I studied up on the community by reading the local paper I came across a social gossip column that described the week's social calendar in town.

One entry described how Mr. and Mrs. Jones went to have dinner on Friday night at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Harris. The article said that Jell-O salad and chicken was served. A good time was had by all. It was a little too much neighborliness for my taste.

My sister lives in a very small farming town in Eastern Oregon where I once worked as a pastor for a summer. My sister shops at the Two Boys Market in Condon where you have to navigate your cart down narrow corridors between four food aisles. Cozy. Just so you know, Two Boys has just one kind of lettuce in the produce section. Two Boys embodies the world view of Ralph's Pretty Good grocery described by Garrison Keillor which is: If we don't have it you probably did not need it anyway. If something happens in town, everyone at Two Boys Grocery seems to know about it by the time you pick up your pork chops and get to the front register. My sister loves that small town but every few weeks she needs to escape and seek out the anonymity of the big city. She hungers some times for a little more back porch than front porch in her life.

But in spite of our love for the back porch aspects of our lives, I think so many of us long for the healing benefits of front porch living where we are drawn out of isolation and into community. It has always been so. In this epistle, James is writing to a congregation that is dealing with its own sense of isolation. So many in this community were divided by class. It was a painful time where people were so isolated from each other. Gossip and economic strife divided that community. They longed for the care of a praying and loving community that pointed to the loving embrace of God.

James offered a vision of community where the walls are dropped and people can find the space to name their deepest physical and spiritual wounds and make themselves vulnerable enough that they could receive the care of others. For James, a church was always about helping people move from the back porch to the front porch.

Unfortunately, in our world we live too much on our back porches. Our homes, our work, and our churches become shrines to privacy, isolation and anonymity. Parents are away at work all the time. And we might get a little sick of watching re-runs of Glee at home when we are all alone. In her book, A Tribe Apart, Patricia Hirsch did a study on high school students in a Virginia suburban community where the overwhelming conclusion was that high school kids often longed to know their parents and spend more time with them.

Sometimes what we want is for that grandmotherly figure next door to pay attention and bring us some flowers or some cookies if we are sick or are feeling a little punk because we just broke up with our boyfriend. Progress in our work places means a bigger office with a higher wall. Even our churches become places where we live with the abiding sense that people won't understand our struggles. Church is a privatized sort

of experience which becomes one more thing we check off on our weekly to do list as we rush off to do something else.

We can also suffer in silence. We carry pains in our souls and in our bodies. We worry no one will understand or want to hear about it. Would someone understand what it's really like to have a parent or spouse slipping away because of Alzheimer's? Or would someone really believe me if I told them I was subjected to racial taunts in this open minded community of Burlington? What if we admitted in Vermont where we worship thrift, that we struggle with too much debt and our home is in danger of foreclosure? Would someone understand? Would someone understand if we admitted that five years after losing our spouse to death or divorce, the pain still feels a little too crushing? Would people just say that we should be over it by now? If we had a child before marriage, could we present our child here for baptism even though we can't find the father? Would people embrace us? If you were having surgery or had a cancer diagnosis is there a way we could talk about it and not feel overwhelmed?

Given these and so many challenges, I grow tired of churches that idolize the isolation of the back porch while diminishing the public and communal nature of the front porch. They risk becoming an extension of privatized culture where the art of speaking and listening well and caring for one another is lost. How sad.

In this world, I think people long for a church where we can present all of who we are to our community and our God. James did not envision a church that looked like some gated community where all we do is gossip, talk about your bridge game and sip lemonade. Instead, James invites us to envision church which is more of a front porch experience where we can talk about what hurts and what matters.

Do any of you remember years ago when Ronald Reagan as President stood in front of the Berlin Wall? The Berlin Wall was a gruesome symbol of isolation, oppression, and the worst excesses of communist rule dividing East from West Germany. Do you remember what Reagan said as he stood in front of that wall? He said, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." I think the church needs to be in the business of tearing down all kinds of walls that diminish our full humanity, squelch our freedom to speak and think, and prevent us from presenting our whole selves to each other in the presence of God. For James, the root of this front porch approach to ministry is always grounded in our prayer.

Prayer is a loaded word for a lot of people. To be honest some of the ways James talks about it are filled with some peril. Perhaps the most disturbing description has to do with Elijah's prayer calling on God to act like some sort of Santa Clause parcelling out natural disasters based on the quality of our prayer and who is more naughty than nice. If this is true, then what do we do with Hurricane Irene? Were the communities most destroyed by this storm the least earnest in their prayer? Ridiculous. To be fair, I think this conception of prayer is a way of reminding us that we are caught up in a divine drama and need to give up the pretense of controlling everything all by our selves. But

even James, I think would agree that God is not a monster. The God to whom we pray is about inspiring us to alleviate suffering instead of creating it through what we do or say.

For James, prayer in its best sense should lead us to see our brother and sister in a different light. Being a community of prayer, we are invited to live a life of compassion, not of revenge. Through prayer, we see our brother and sister in a multidimensional way. When we pray, sometimes the person who is so difficult for us to understand or appreciate starts looking more like a human being than some object we are trying to manipulate for our narrow political or personal purposes. As people of prayer, we can find some beauty even in the person who annoys us.

Are any of you suffering? May we pray for you?

Are any of you feeling un-reconciled to your brother to sister? May we pray for you?

Can you bring this pain to God in this place knowing you will find a listening ear and some guidance?

Have you lived without healing touch in your life for too long? May we pray for you?

And then would you let a couple people of prayer gently brush your forehead and hands with oil and listen to you with an open heart?

And what if we could create some time and space where we could share with one another the story of our lives and our deepest thoughts? May we pray for you?

And if we have been singing shallow songs of isolation for too long, could we come here to sing songs of lament and joy with meaning and power? Could we all pray and sing together?

In this praying community, we are here to get real with each other. We embrace the whole of life and not just part of it. I think many of us are sick of living in a world where we have spent too many years hanging out on our back porches suffering in silence. For some it might be a little hard to run out to the front porch today.

That could be a little intimidating even for me. But how about if we move in that direction where we as a community gather to tear down the walls that divide us.

May we come to realize in our hearts that we can't be all we can be until our neighbors can be all they can be. As people of prayer let us tear down this wall which has divided us for too long and gather on the front porch.

Let's gather on that front porch with our aching neighbors where we can pray well, sing songs of healing and hope, and make this old world a new world.

Amen.

