

“Prayer, Water, Salt, and Fire”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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James 5:13-20
Mark 9:38-50

Today’s scripture lessons will make some of you feel like Goldilocks. If you are not familiar with this English children’s folk tale, there is a girl— Goldilocks— who wanders into a house that is not her own; it belongs to a family of bears. The bears are not home. In it she finds three bowls of porridge. The porridge in the big bowl is much too hot; she burns her tongue and tries the medium bowl of porridge, but it is much too cold. When she tries the smallest bowl of porridge, it is just right— and she eats it all up! Then she tries to sit down. The largest chair she tries is much too hard. The next chair is much too soft. The smallest chair is just right— except she breaks it. She decides to lie down. Of course the smallest bed is to her suiting, and she falls right to sleep. The bears then head to their home, and the little bear discovers his porridge is eaten; his chair is broken; and there is a strange girl sleeping in his bed. The bears wake her up, and the startled girl runs out of the house into the forest.

Like the girl wandering into a strange house, when we look at today’s scriptures, we may find the James passage *too soft*. According to James, prayer cures *everything*. If you are suffering? You should pray. If you are cheerful? Sing songs of praise. Prayer will save the sick, forgive sins, and raise you up. Sounds nice, doesn’t it? These words would fit beautifully on a Hallmark card. Maybe too nice to be true, if you are one who has ever suffered through something, prayed, and *not* felt the hand of God lift you up.

Similarly, the words from Jesus in Mark’s gospel might feel *too hard*. Where is the Jesus who talks about love, forgiveness, and grace? This Jesus is telling us that if you influence a little one into sin, then it is better to have a millstone tied to your neck and get thrown into the sea. *Remind me to save my sins for when my daughter isn’t looking!* Jesus goes on to say that if your hand causes us to sin, cut it off; if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out, because it’s better to go to heaven with one eye, than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where their

worm never dies and the fire is never quenched. For those of us who judge other religions that talk about cutting off your hand if it causes you to steal, let me remind you that Jesus said the exact same thing. These are some hard, fiery, and salty words.

Are you ready, like Goldilocks, to run away from these scriptures?

But before we take off into the forest, let's test the words out a little more to see if we can find a fit.

When I was working in youth ministry in a former church, we had a teenager—let's call her Trudy. She was a church kid, through and through, the third generation of her family to be active in our church. But like Goldilocks, she sometimes crossed other people's boundaries; in Trudy's case, with her sarcastic comments, salty words, and teasing people just a bit too far. And as is common with teenagers, friendship circles that had once been inclusive and supportive restructured, and tightened up, with Trudy finding herself on the outside. Jesus said if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Well, nothing Trudy had done was sinful— or at least, no more sinful than anyone else. Still, she started to feel so much self-shame and judgment that she began injuring herself. Her mom found her bleeding in the bathroom, and got Trudy some intensive medical care.

It turns out that Trudy was dealing with tremendous anxiety and depression. She— who had been a top honors student— took a month out of school while she worked on her mental health. When it was time for Trudy to come back to school, the light that had seemed to dim in her was starting to glimmer again. However, she dreaded that first day back, facing people who were her friends— or used to be her friends.

But Trudy was a child of the church, and her church decided to show up for her. We held a blessing for Trudy in the chapel of the church the night before she went back to school. Trudy picked 3 adults from the church she trusted, and 3 youth from the church as well, and whatever family members she wanted to join her for the blessing. Everyone who Trudy suggested we invite showed up for her. We had a bowl of water in the chapel, and began the blessing with a reaffirmation of Trudy's baptism, with her parents recounting the day of her christening, and touching her once again with the water that had marked her a

baby. We reminded her that these waters still carry her, and hold God's love for her, a love that cannot be taken away. Trudy had invited two of her favorite Sunday School teachers, and one of her youth advisors. She invited one of the friends who had remained close with her, and two who had drifted apart. Her family was there. Each person brought something that was a symbol of a gift Trudy holds inside of her, and presented her with it, to remind her of the strength and blessedness she holds within her. We laid hands on her, and anointed her with oil as a sign of her healing, but also a sign of her being chosen and called by God.

Trudy found her footing again in high school. She slowly built up a group of friends she could really count on. She was voted president of the church youth group her senior year, and discovered theater as a cathartic way to channel her many strong emotions. It was not always easy, but Trudy had some better coping mechanisms, a good therapist... and I like to think her church showed her that if she fell into despair again, the waters of baptism would hold her up— and if she ever forgot the truth of her belovedness, her church would remind her, again and again.

I do not know if prayer can really cause rain to fall or rain to cease, as James reports that it did for Elijah. But I do know something about the healing power of a *community* that can pray with and for you.

Likewise, baptism is not magic. It will not cause you to make the right choices all the time. It will not keep you from choosing sin. It will not protect you from all suffering. But the waters of baptism are a physical, visual, wet sign of an invisible truth: that God's love is an ever-flowing stream, and it will hold you up; it will wash over you when you make mistakes; it will quench your thirst if you let it; and it will birth you from death to life, each day a chance for resurrection in Jesus' name.

When we accept what these life-giving waters bring, we also have the chance to say goodbye to that which is death-dealing in our lives. What obstacles do you face right now in your walk of faith? Breaking free of a harmful relationship, giving up a cherished point of view, breaking an addiction, forgiving a family member, making a significant lifestyle change, facing past abuse and finding healing from it— ***all these can feel like death***. Like drownings. Like *losing our*

arms and legs. Debie Thomas says that “Jesus knows what he’s talking about: it hurts to change. It hurts to cut off the precious, familiar things we cling to for dear life— even as those things slowly kill us. The bottle. The affair. The obsession with money. The decades-old shame. The resentment, the victimhood, the self-hatred, the rigidity.”¹

I am convinced that Jesus used some very hard words, like fire and hell, to grab our attention and to help us find our freedom. If he had blandly talked about grace, and love, and thrown a sweet lamb parable in there, he might not have awakened listeners to a needed but difficult truth: the Christian walk is not an easy one. If he had not sparked us with a little fire, we would still be pushing our obstacles in front of us, rather than casting them aside and living our wounded, but full, lives in Jesus Christ.

I try to go to the gym 3 times a week, plus I go to Susheela’s BollyX class on Thursdays. It has taken me decades to commit to a regular exercise habit— I had my own stumbling blocks to get there. But now that I have it, I can feel how much this practice makes me healthier physically and mentally— even if it doesn’t give me six-pack abs. After an hour of working out, my skin glistens with water and salt, the molecules of my sweat. If my clothes are soaked when I peel them off before my shower, I am particularly pleased by my effort.

The work of a Christian life won’t necessarily make you sweat baptismal water seasoned with salt. Your prayers will not always give you immediate or miraculous results. Your service to others in need will not end your own suffering. But the more you put these ways of Christ’s teaching into practice, the more you will start to notice your spiritual health improve. The more you will find that you are not alone on this journey, but you are surrounded by a powerful connection to others who will walk with you, to sigh with you at suffering, rejoice with you in your gladness, and to look back at your journey and tell you how far you have come. The more you get a sense of your own belovedness in God’s eyes, the better equipped you will be to see and treat the world with love.

Chances are, if you find some days that the journey of discipleship is too soft to meet the rough patches of your life and the woundedness of the world, and on

¹ Debie Thomas, “ If It Causes You to Stumble” in *Journeys with Jesus: A Weekly Webzine for the Global Church*, Sept. 23, 2018.

some days the journey of discipleship is too hard, then you are probably doing it... just right.