

"Slow Me Down Girlfriend"

July 10, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel Smith

Texts: James 5: 13-16

"Old Camel Knees." That's what the church used to call him. He also was known as James the Just, and tradition has it that he was the earthly brother of Jesus. I'm speaking about the author of the letter from which I just read. According to the fourth-century historian Eusebius, James "was frequently found upon his knees praying and begging forgiveness for the people, so that his knees became hard like those of a camel, in consequence of his constantly bending them in his worship of God." Imagine praying so regularly and fervently that your knees grew calloused! I wonder. I wonder if it was his way of keeping his heart soft, such that *it* wouldn't grow callous under the daily strains of living under an oppressive regime and unjust authorities with violence all around. James was also known for his wisdom, humility, and deeply pastoral leadership of a small first-century community of Jewish Christians. It all comes through in the lines I just read from chapter 5 and the simple yet powerful questions he asks: Are any among you suffering? Are any cheerful? Are any sick? It comes through in the guidance he provides. Then pray, then sing, the call for the church's elders to offer healing prayers and anointing with oil. There's an invitation here as well to confess, which can also sometimes be part of what we most need to open our hearts to God's healing and the wholeness God offers.

Then as now, as in times of Jesus' own ministry, this kind of communal prayer, singing, and anointing is what churches do in times of grief, suffering, or sickness, whether in body or soul, and in moments when people are hurting, rundown or restless, whether individually or collectively as a congregation, community or nation.

For years before Covid, this church has had a regular practice of offering services like these every few months. Today, we gratefully resume this ancient practice, adding an online option, and never has it seemed so needed. One of you texted me earlier this week: "Damned good thing it's a healing service this Sunday - I'm gutted by this week and it's only Wednesday." I texted back: "I hear ya - anything in particular you are feeling?" She replied: "Fascists attacking a black man in Boston last Saturday with no legal repercussions? A two-year-old orphan in Highland Park found wandering in Highland Park after parents killed? Jayland Walker full of 60 bullet wounds? I don't want to go on." I said: "Got it. Thanks. Way too much of everything! "And I meant the gratitude. I was grateful that her heart had not grown callous, that she was not numb or in denial of a pain that is so deep, real, and ever-present for so many these days. And that's just some of the stuff going on in the wider world when I know many of us are carrying personal burdens, too.

Friends, it is too much. It's too much to hold alone. James knew it. It was why he was "Old Camel Knees," patellas deep in the dirt every day because he needed to feel the ground of his faith in God underneath him. He knew he needed to share it with God, who would understand and stand under him. He knew he couldn't carry it alone, so he encouraged people to bring their suffering and their good times too into community where we can, by God's grace, lift each other up, and pray for healing and wholeness for each other and our world.

Friends, our words don't need to be fancy. They shouldn't be performative. They just need to be honest and real. If you are feeling new to prayer, or unsure of if or how it can be helpful, or effective as James writes, I invite you to read an excellent piece that Anne Lamott wrote in yesterday's New York Times. It's about how a regular practice of prayer has changed her life. She starts by saying she doesn't need prayers on the 50-yard line of high school football games but then she shifts and talks about how prayer is meaningful for her. She talks about praying in the morning, during the day, sometimes just giving thanks. She talks about praying as she walks and before bed too. It's become a natural part of her daily rhythm. Maybe not camel knees – she's too on the move for that – but prayer keeps her heart soft and it definitely keeps her humble. I also love her characteristically irreverent style and her conversational tone with God! She writes that one of her go-to daily prayers to God is this: "Slow me down, Girlfriend!" Don't you love that? Slow me down, girlfriend! Mmm - mmm! She goes on to say that just that prayer changes her. "It breaks the toxic trance," she writes. I think we could also use such a prayer, something to break the toxic trance we can all feel in our busy lives, in our doom scrolling, even in our urgency to do something which can ultimately leave our hearts hardened!

Slow me down, Girlfriend, indeed! Help me pause! Help me feel it! Hold me, like a loving parent! Soothe me, God! Restore me to my soul! Ease my fears! Breathe with me! In addition, to whatever specifics we may be called to lift up in prayer right now, and they are legion no doubt, these too are examples of healing prayers, plain spoken, simple, vulnerable and true.

And now for the invitation which will be familiar to those of you who have done this with us before. Friends, we know that this wonderful world is also a world of sorrow, and that each of us bears a burden that is sometimes too heavy to carry alone. Today we wish to offer you a time of blessing and consolation, a time to renew your faith in God's promise of wholeness and well-being for all people, and indeed for all creation. This is an opportunity to come forward if you are in-person, or to join a zoom call - the link is in your bulletin. If you wish, feel free to share briefly and confidentially what you are holding in your heart with a Deacon or pastoral staff member. It's a chance to receive a gentle word of prayer, a touch of soothing oil, and a reassuring hand—all signs of God's gifts of peace and hope. Some of you may wish not to come forward during this time. As you remain seated, please enjoy the quiet and the music, and pray for the world, for others, and for yourselves. Whether you remain seated or come forward, whether you ask aloud or silently within your hearts, God knows your need, and God comes to us all with hope and healing and peace. Let that grace enfold us all now!