

**Trinity Episcopal Church, Lawrence, Kansas**  
**Sermon 9/27/09, The Rev. Paul K. McLain III**

*My House shall be a House of Prayer*

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen. The season of fall officially began earlier this week. This is a busy time in the life of Trinity Church and a busy time in your lives. Schools and colleges are now in high-gear and the ominous mid-term exams are approaching. Work picks up for our retail businesses and certainly traffic picks up. Football is in high gear and basketball is around the corner. Here at Trinity, we have an especially busy fall schedule with surveys and scheduled conversation meetings as we begin the search for a new rector. And, as you will hear today, we are beginning our fall stewardship emphasis with our first in a series of testimonies from members later in this service. In all this busy-ness, it's easy to forget about someone along the way. That someone is God. God said, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer.' One writer put it this way: 'True, we need to have our business meetings and our committee meetings and our Bible studies and our self-help groups and our worship services, but if the fire is not hot at the center, these things are only ashes in our hands.'

A couple of weeks ago, Haskell Indian Nations University celebrated its 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary on a Thursday. All day long near the center of campus, there was a ceremonial fire. Members of the Haskell community reverently tended that fire hour by hour, moment by moment. Prayer is stoking the fire of God. Today's reading from James is the final section of the book. It concludes by giving the defining characteristic of what it means to be a Christian community –It means being a people of prayer. The conditions the author describes match the conditions you and I feel this morning. There are those among us who are suffering. We should pray. There are those among us who are cheerful. We should offer prayers of thanksgiving. And, most of us feel shades of suffering, joy, and all sorts of other things. James gives us an honest place to begin our prayers –with our own sufferings and joys, to pray for our needs and give thanks for our blessings. As we become closer knit as a community, we feel the sufferings of other members of Trinity and we share in the joys of our fellow members. Our prayers move beyond ourselves to become intercessory prayers for others. One of the most important parts of our worship service is the Prayers of the People, in which we as a community offer intercessory prayers on behalf of those who are sick, those with special concerns, and those who have died.

James also describes the special role of the church in not only praying for the sick, but anointing the sick with oil, which we do here following the service on the first and third Sundays and at our worship service at Brandon Woods Retirement Home each month. The priests and deacons are available to anoint you with oil at other times and during visits. Oil was widely used for medical purposes in the Greco-Roman world. Anointing is an outward sign that there is no gap between spiritual and physical healing. They happen together. What James is also saying is that the sick are not to be alienated from the community. To the contrary, the sick are to be especially lifted up through prayer and anointing. James says prayer is effective. He writes 'the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.' I believe that faithful prayer to God has the power to heal. We often don't know when and how the healing will take place, and it may not take place on our terms.

A hospital chaplain once told me, ‘Death too can be a form of healing.’ James is interested not only in healing from sickness, but healing from sin. An important component of prayer is confession of sin, which we do here publicly as part of the service each Sunday, but which you have the opportunity to do privately with a priest through the rite of Reconciliation of a Penitent. You may also offer confession to a fellow member of Trinity, which may be especially appropriate if you feel you have wronged this member. And you may offer confession of sin in your private prayers. Then James says ‘pray for one another.’ I find it especially appropriate to pray for those with whom you feel out of fellowship or those whom you feel in conflict. Prayer has the power to begin to mend broken relationships. James compares the prayers of the community members with Elijah, the great prophet and prayer warrior of the Old Testament. This is great encouragement to us when we feel we are unworthy to pray or that our prayers might not be effective. There is power in prayer. James concludes his book by exhorting the people to one of the most difficult of prayers – the prayer of mutual correction. It is often easier to talk to someone else about the faults of or your concerns for another person, rather than to sit and pray and talk with the person you feel is at fault or for whom you are concerned. This sort of prayer is difficult because it requires us to covenant in a sense of mutual vulnerability and accountability. Ultimately, it’s about caring for our brothers and sisters at the deepest of levels.

We also begin to realize that our sisters and brothers are not only here within these four walls, but are up and down Massachusetts Street, throughout Lawrence, and all across the world. In the Prayers of the People, we offer prayers of intercession that go far beyond these four walls. We pray for the universal church and its leaders, this nation and all nations and those in authority, the work of community organizations, and the stewardship of this planet. We pray for all who suffer with hardships and poverty. We pray to make a difference and bring the hope of Christ to all.

Two big areas of work at Trinity this fall –putting together a profile for the search for a new rector and the fall emphasis on stewardship can, at first glance, seem like inside-the-four-walls-of- Trinity activities. But when these areas are infused with prayer, they become something much more profound. We pray each week the prayer for the search of a new rector. Listen carefully as we pray that prayer today. An important part of that prayer is that we are asking God for a faithful pastor who will equip *us* for our ministries. This prayer acknowledges that we are all ministers. A key role for our new rector will be to bring out and develop our gifts to all minister within, and more importantly, beyond these four walls. And when we infuse stewardship with prayer, we discover that it’s not about funding the church, but is instead about our mutual devotion to an understanding that everything we have and everything we are belongs to God. Prayer brings us into a spirit of thanksgiving from which blessings flow as we conform our private economies to the economy of God. Stewardship is not simply about how much we give to the church. It’s more about how we give, work, spend, and save throughout the week. James understood that prayer is the means by which we become a community of solidarity and a community of caring. To paraphrase a spiritual writer, “The most interesting thing about prayer is God.” If we truly pray to God and listen to God, we may be moved in exciting directions which we can not yet even dream. Jesus said, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer.’ When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he taught them *by* praying. May we become his house of prayer as we pray his prayer together –

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.