

**The Rev. Dorota Pruski**  
**St. Andrew's Episcopal Church**  
**Sunday, September 27, 2015**  
**Proper 21B / James 5:13-20**

One of my favorite movie characters is Gus Portokalos, the father in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. For those who are unfamiliar with the movie, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is the story of Toula, a 30-year-old woman of Greek descent, who meets and falls in love with a man her parents do not approve of. Not only is this man vegetarian (a major flaw), he is also American, meaning *not Greek*. The movie is a sweet reflection on family, heritage, love, and transformation. Anyway, Gus, Toula's father, is perfectly endearing: he's a squat, sincere man with an extreme comb-over and thick Greek accent. The thing I love best about him, however, is his faith in a particular kind of alternative medicine.

Toula introduces us to her father in a voice over during the opening scene of the movie. We see Gus washing the car while Toula's voice narrates the following: *My dad believed in only two things: that Greeks should educate non-Greeks about being Greek, and that any ailment, from psoriasis to poison ivy, could be cured with Windex*. The scene ends with her father spraying Windex on his windshield and then on a cut on his hand.

Throughout the movie, Gus has that Windex bottle at his side and does not hesitate to spray it on unsuspecting family members while offering sound advice:  
You have a rash? Put some Windex on it!  
Swollen toe? Put some Windex on it!  
A pimple on your wedding day? Put some Windex on it!

I suspect Gus Portokalos was reading from the same playbook as the author of the Letter of James. James closes his letter today with some thoughts on prayer. "Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them" (James 5:13-14). In short, whatever befalls you, put some prayer on it!

To emphasize his point, James adds, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (James 5:16). And lest any of us doubt the efficacy of prayer, James evokes Elijah as proof: "Elijah was a human being like us!" he says, "And he was able to pray so powerfully that there was no rain anywhere in the whole world for three and a half years!"

Yes, James, Elijah, who was a prophet and who was assumed into heaven riding a fiery chariot, is "just like us." Spray us with a little more of that Windex, would you?

The certainty with which James promotes prayer can leave us feeling as skeptical as we are of the medicinal properties of glass cleaner. I mean, how powerful and effective *is* prayer really? Does prayer work? We know from lived experience that prayer is not like finding the right change for God's vending machine, where the correct input leads to the desired output. After all,

who among us hasn't prayed fervently and wholeheartedly for an outcome that didn't come to pass?

So the question remains: does prayer really work? To add a little grist to our mill, I'll offer that some of the wisest theologians and pastors of our time write openly about their own struggles with prayer. For example, Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and famous preacher, describes herself as a failure at prayer. And renowned theologian Frederick Buechner, says this about his prayer life:

My prayer life is meager. It's not organized. I don't have moments of prayer, I don't follow any schedule of prayer, I don't have any theory about prayer... My prayer is mostly blubbing. It is sporadic, and random, and inarticulate, and helpless.

If the most theologically articulate among us are not exceptionally articulate or disciplined in prayer, and we can't seem to figure out how to get the response we want from God when we pray, why do it? Why should we listen to James and respond to any and every situation by putting some prayer on it?

There are many ways to answer those questions. We could look at scientific studies that show the ways that prayer has a positive effect on the brain and on the body. We could find anecdotal evidence of moments when people have heard God speaking to them in prayer. Or we could share our own stories of times when we felt closer to God as a result of a prayer experience. Since it is James' words we are wrestling with today, however, I'll let the letter's author be the one to guide us to some answers about the power of prayer.

James' words today do not come to us in a vacuum; rather they are the concluding words from his letter which we have been reading for several weeks now. James is one of the most challenging books in the Bible because James is uniquely concerned with the responsibility we have to one another as members of God's beloved community. The author of the letter does not mince words about the need for us to lift up the poor and lowly, to be doers of the word and not just hearers of it, and to avoid partiality or favor the wealthy. In short, the letter of James is focused on the health of the community, not of the individual.

In this context, today's passage is not about using prayer as the means by which I try to convince God to give me what I want; rather, for the author of James, prayer is the means by which the community becomes a community. Prayer is powerful and effective because it shapes the common life of God's people.

Going back to the earlier question then, does prayer work? Well, if prayer isn't measured by whether or not we do it the "right way" or whether or not we get what we ask for, but is instead measured by how it forms and transforms our communal identity, then the answer lies here, in this sanctuary, in the people sitting beside you and across the aisle from you.

We come here, week after week, with our suffering and our joy, with our sickness and with our health, as sinners and as saints, to invite God and one another into our fragile and vulnerable hearts. We live in a day and age when the alternatives to Sunday morning worship are endless.

We could be any number of other places right now, with any number of other people right now, probably even with people we have more in common with than we do with one another. But we show up here anyway.

We come even when we cannot clearly articulate to unchurched friends why we go to church. We come even when we cannot clearly articulate to ourselves why we go to church. We come and we pray. And in so doing, we somehow become a “we.” We become the church. And by reminding ourselves and one another of the need we have for community—for communion—our wounds begin to heal, and our brokenness becomes a little more whole.

So from where I stand, I’d say prayer works. Way better than Windex ;)