

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Singing, Praying and Healing"
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The digital version of the newspaper the *Telegraph* from England reported a story on March 27 of this year entitled "Why singing makes you happy" with the subtitle, "Singing is good for your health and won't damage your wealth." It also suggested the following points to consider:

* Build your confidence by watching the Mamma Mia! DVD – if Pierce Brosnan can get paid for his singing there's hope for us all. Buy the singalong version and practise in the privacy of your own home.

* If you decide you are ready for lessons, websites such as www.musicteachers.co.uk and www.singing-teachers.co.uk will help you find a teacher in your area. Music shops may also be able to provide personal recommendations. Be prepared to pay between £9 and £20 for 30 minutes.

* If you want to join a choir, www.choirs.org.uk will give you a list of 2,288 to choose from, listed alphabetically and geographically.

* Singing produces "feel-good" endorphins – eating chocolate does too, but singing is less fattening.

* Singing is a great way to work out – it's an aerobic exercise that increases oxygen levels in the blood without leaving you hot and sweaty.

* Singing makes you look good – it improves posture and tones tummy muscles.

* It's very hard to worry and sing simultaneously – singing reduces stress levels and blood pressure.

- Choirs are great places to meet people – for example, the City of Glasgow Chorus boasts four married couples who met over sheet music.

Our own choir can boast a recent engagement, so it is true. So much for singing, now let's talk about praying.

“Praying is good for your health” is apparently a more controversial subject with a number of opinions, for instance see the December 22, 2003 American article entitled “Is prayer good for your health? A critique of the scientific research” at www.heritage.org/research/religion/hl816.cfm. Or you can read Chuck Colson’s article entitled “Living by Faith is Good for your Health” in the *Washington Post* from June 16, 2008 where he cites research that shows that even people not knowing they were receiving prayer while in hospital had a higher rate of recovery than those who were not receiving prayer.

Regardless of how we assess our ability to do proper scientific studies of whether praying is good for your health, few if any, argue that we should disregard or disrespect the spirituality of those who are in the hospital or in any other medical context. In fact, the opposite seems to be true. As doctors are more often asking questions about domestic violence or hobbies, they are also being encouraged to take a brief spiritual history of the patient that would take two minutes to ascertain and record. In the United States, a number of doctors are also praying with their patients, where appropriate. Most of the time, in many contexts, medical doctors are encouraged to refer their patients to the hospital chaplain or their religious leader, minister, pastor or priest.

My main points in going through some of this literature is emphasizing that it is generally held that singing and praying are good for your health. These are not radical statements but rather fall in line with what James says about the essential identity of the church. The essential identity of the church is a singing, praying, healing place. At least, it is supposed to be that.

That’s why James says it is only fitting to sing when we are reasonably well and we are cheerful. It is appropriate to memorize songs of praise, even as we have many other songs memorized which are not what we might call praise to God.

And when times are tough (like just about every day), it is good to pray. I personally am of the strong opinion that the daily news should drive us to pray. Talking to God about the things that move us most, whether it is violence against babies or against women, praying is a very healthy response to the news. In short, it is good to pray. Whether it is a small thing, or a matter of life and death, it is good to pray. We can and should do more than pray. We practically help others day by day. But let’s not forget to pray, in this secular age that gives little value to prayer, that the Scripture and God have an opposite opinion to our culture. In fact, prayer should be bumped

up on all our lists of things to do, because we would see more positive change here, more than we might expect.

The other situation which James wants to address is that of the person who finds herself or himself sick. What do you do? Although our medical technology has gone light years ahead in the last two thousand years, nevertheless, we still should pray for one another. Praying reminds us of the fact that no matter how well our medical technology or technicians can sustain us, they still are not God and do not determine our life or our life choices.

James suggests we invite the elders, the church leaders, to anoint us with oil. This practice is common today in a number of denominations, our own included, although I personally don't carry oil in my pocket. Perhaps I should. It is used at the end of life in some traditions, and used whenever requested in others.

Still others use water, whether blessed or simple tap water, to help people in their healing process. Oil is the symbol of the Holy Spirit and of blessing. Water is the symbol of cleansing and purifying. The use of these symbols is helpful in a number of contexts, and I would be happy to visit you and anoint you as you request. I'm sure the elders would also be open to this practice. The point is your decision to depend on the body of Christ, the community of God, to help you in your healing journey, whether that is physical healing, or emotional or any other kind.

The other principle that James brings up in chapter five is that of confession. We confess our sins quietly Sunday by Sunday, because it is an important way to reconnect with God. It is a part of our worship to be honest and vulnerable with God, so we confess our sins. This is not to downplay the seriousness of our sins. It is to free us from the burden of them. There is also a freedom in having a place to be honest about what we truly think and what we have done, no matter how good or how bad that is.

James acknowledges that confession is not only a good thing to do with God; it is also good to confess our sins to one another. This means not only asking forgiveness of one another when we have sinned against each other. It also means we can tell each other the bad we have thought and have done, so as to receive forgiveness from another human being. This is the power of community, shaped by God, acting in love for one another. Of course, this requires trust, confidentiality and a safe place. But it is one of the deepest

places we can go in healing. James knew this and experienced it in the Lord's presence in the early church. He now passes it on to us.

The difficult thing to do now is to muster the courage to approach others to have the experience, because we never absolutely know how people will respond to us when we request this type of confession. The confessional has been a part of many traditions with only an ordained priest able to take this position. But James notes that all believers can do this for one another. Of course, there is some wisdom in doing this with someone who has received some training, education and experience in this. But this is not absolutely required.

So we can today experience the healing power of the Lord. Does this mean that every illness will be conquered in a single experience? No. Does this mean that we can require God to heal us quickly? No. But we can risk asking for healing, just as Elijah asked for change in the weather. And Elijah, although he was a prophet, was just like you and me. In fact, some commentators believe he suffered from clinical depression. Remember what he said when he felt alone and that there were no other believers around, and God had to remind him that there were 7000 others just like him in that time. Remember when he ran away from civilization to get away from Jezebel and pleaded with God to take his life? It sounds like others who have experienced the depths of depression. The point is that God answers prayers from all kinds of needy people, not just the healthy ones. So we can take encouragement from the fact that Elijah's prayers were answered, James says.

Finally, it's good to share with each other. It's good to share with our national church in the program that makes our national Presbyterian church a reality. In the bulletin, you have the details of that. It's also good to share where we are in the faith. Because we are all in different places in our faith journeys, we should be able to share where we are, remembering that it is God who evaluates where we are, rather than evaluating one another. We can do this, but we must be sensitive to each other out of respect and love. This does not exclude challenging each other to greater faith. It does mean we can and should share. As we give away what we have, there we experience the blessing of the Lord. You only can keep what you give away is often the paradoxical teaching of Scripture.

Let us pray.