

At Ground Zero: James 5:13-20

by [Stephen Paul Bouman](#) in the [September 20, 2003](#) issue

Are there 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, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. (James 5:13-14)

I looked down at the familiar face of a young woman dying of AIDS. Her breathing was ragged, her eyes closed. Ramona was a leader of her struggling inner-city church, with an infectious and earthy love of her Lord. She had become a friend in the Diakonia lay training program and at some point we had switched roles: she became the teacher and I the student.

Her struggle with her illness was also a struggle of faith, and she had shared much of it with me: her anger and struggle to forgive her husband, whose intravenous drug use had visited this disease on her; her worry about her children and her parents; her elation and depression as she rode the rhythms of AIDS; her determination to maintain a strong interior landscape as her body deteriorated; her daily search for Jesus in all of it; her anguish at the swath this disease was cutting through the black community.

Now she was too weak to speak, but nodded her head toward my communion set. The faith is never more carnal and touching than when we are in the presence of suffering or illness. We proceeded with what Father Divine called the "tangibilification of God." I communed her with the tiniest bit of wafer, anointed her head with oil and prayed for God's healing presence. We shared a blessing. I sat down and held her hand.

"I would like to give you a gift," her father said to me from his chair in the corner. He rose and in a deep voice recited a poem titled "Heaven's Grocery Store." He gestured, his voice rising and falling dramatically as he became consumed by his poem and oblivious to those who stopped by the door to listen. His gift to me for caring about his daughter was also his way of telling her that heaven awaited her.

With a nod of her head, Ramona had confessed her faith. With a poem from his oral tradition, her father confessed his. In a hospital room in Bayonne, New Jersey, two children of God made the church's ancient confession their present quiet joy.

"Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise." The pastor lay in bed in a Brooklyn hospital, fighting the last stages of brain cancer. We spoke of many things, but the conversation repeatedly returned to the people and ministry of the Bronx congregation where he had served as interim pastor. His gently loving and patient pastoral ministry had helped the parish grasp a hopeful vision of the future. Their history of conflict and heartbreaking decline had many wondering if there was any future for this parish. His ministry provided space for healing and reconciliation. He loved the people of the parish back into confidence in their giftedness and potential. In the hospital bed this pastor spoke of his love for Fordham Lutheran Church in the Bronx.

Again the carnal "tangibilification" of the church. Bread and wine. "The Lord be with you . . . lift up your heart" echoing the prayers and songs of generations of faith. Oil traced on a sweaty, fevered forehead reminding us of baptism and healing presence. It was like a revelation to this pastor. He ate and drank and was touched by oil, and he gave me a knowing smile. "So," he said, "This is what I have been doing."

"Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord."

Members of his congregation gathered frequently at his bedside. They sang his favorite hymns, prayed, shared favorite passages from scripture. By their faith and presence, they reminded him of resurrection hope. The pastor whom God had sent to heal the heartbreak in the life of this parish was now visited in his own vulnerability at the gate of death.

"Are any among you suffering? They should pray." We watched in horror from our 16th-floor office window as both towers lit up, then fell into a cloud of smoke and ash. Then we gathered in the chapel of the Interchurch Center with hundreds who came to pray, not knowing the fate of loved ones. I asked the people to name the folks in their hearts and their concern as our prayer before God. The chapel rang out with the precious names of loved ones, spoken through clenched teeth, strained and breaking voices.

Sitting next to a soot-covered survivor on a bench who was screaming hysterically as bodies rained from the sky, a pastor's wife (who had just escaped from Tower One) takes her hand and quotes Romans 8: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord."

A chaplain anointed the foreheads of firemen with oil. Later survivors remembered seeing glistening foreheads rushing past them toward rescue . . . and death, living out baptismal vocation.

At Ground Zero, breathing lightly through my mask, I searched for hope. Then this came to me like a gift: *we are already buried*. "Do you not know that you have been buried with Christ Jesus by baptism unto death? So that as Christ was raised by the power of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life."

Carnal grace.