

“The Soul in Everyday Stuff: Oil”
James 5:14-15

During the first week of January, I found myself in a desert of isolation. A mild case of the flu had kept me home, and while Zoom allowed me to "attend" meetings, it couldn't touch the loneliness that illness often brings.

Then came Wednesday. That day, our Episcopalian friends were out with us blessing homes for Epiphany. I hadn't signed up; I was supposed to be the one *doing* the blessing. But the team stopped by anyway. They left a bag with prayers and frankincense. In that moment, the "illusion of isolation" simply vanished. That simple act of blessing felt overwhelmingly healing, reminding me of my deep connection to God and all of creation.

No matter how spiritually mature we think we are, the illusion of separation is ever-present. Hardship makes us feel like islands. But God gave us "everyday stuff" to bridge that gap. Specifically, God gave us the gift of anointing with oil.

As the Bible Project reminds us, <https://youtu.be/-uPNMO-YA5E>, anointing is a ritual where a person or a place is marked as a "special portal between heaven and earth." It is a physical sign of a spiritual reality: the reunion of God's space and our space.

The writer of James understood this deeply. Writing to early Christians, James provided practical ways to put faith into action. It's easy to talk about God's love in the abstract, but it's much harder when that love requires us to move toward things that scare us—like illness.

In the ancient world, illness wasn't just a physical ailment; it was a social death sentence. Without modern medicine, isolation was the only defense against the plague or leprosy. We see this throughout history: from the Black Death in 1348 to the 1918 flu, and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. In James's time, illness was also often viewed as a divine punishment. To be sick was to be alone, judged, and excluded.

Listen again to James 5:14-15: *“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. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven."

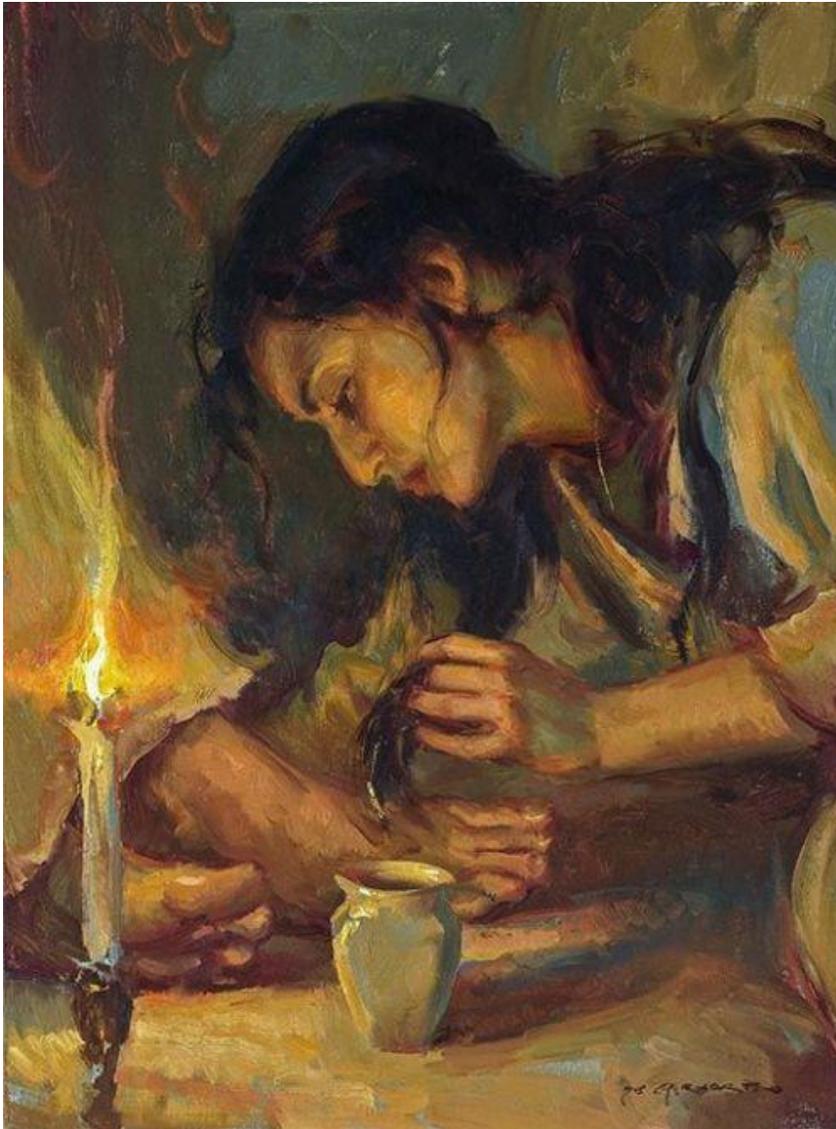
This is a radical call for inclusion. James empowers the person who is suffering to *demand* care. The one who is normally shunned is given the right to call the leaders of the church to their side. It is a reversal of the world's logic. The world says, "Protect yourself; stay away." The Kingdom of God says, "Reach out; touch the hurting."

By using oil—a physical substance—we are saying that the body matters, the pain is real, and God is present right here in the "stuff" of our lives.

In the classic children's book, *The Runaway Bunny*, a little bunny tries to find every possible way to run away from his mother. He says he will become a fish, a rock on a mountain, or a crocus in a garden. And every time, the mother responds: *"If you become a fish... I will become a fisherman and fish for you."* Isolation tells us we have run too far, or that our illness has made us unreachable. But anointing is God's way of saying: **"If you are in the valley of sickness, I will become the oil that finds you there."**

How can we become that bridge of healing for those around us? How might we use the gift of anointing to bless others and to reconnect them to their creator? It starts by recognizing that we are all "Anointed Ones"—Christians—called to carry the fragrance of heaven into the isolated corners of the earth.

As we prepare our hearts for the anointing and communion, I invite you to look at the image on the screen. Settle into your seat, take a deep breath, and let your eyes wander over this scene representing the story of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet at the house of Simon as he was about to experience the ultimate sense of separation and isolation. This powerful act of anointing became the very bridge between heaven and earth for Jesus as he was preparing for death on the cross.



Notice the candle in the corner. It isn't a bright, overwhelming floodlight; it's a small, flickering flame that pushes back the shadows just enough to see what matters. In the darkness of isolation—whether it's the flu, grief, or the "social death sentence" of being forgotten—God's presence often arrives like this candle. It doesn't remove the darkness of the world, but it warms the space exactly where you are sitting.

Where is your life feeling a bit dark or cold right now? Imagine that small, steady flame warming your face, reminding you that you are seen even in the shadows.

Look at the woman's hands. They are steady. They are tender. In the ancient world, to touch the feet of another was to acknowledge their humanity in the most humble way possible. Notice how her hair and her fingers work together to apply the oil. There is no distance. There is no fear of the "dirt" of the road.

If you have felt "untouchable" or "unreachable" lately, see those hands. They represent the community of faith reaching toward you. God is not afraid of your mess, your illness, or your history. God's hands are already moving toward you.

Finally, look at the small jar. It's humble - "everyday stuff" - but it holds something precious. Notice the way the oil makes the skin of the feet glisten. It looks like a "portal between heaven and earth," doesn't it? The oil marks a bridge. In this painting, that bridge is being built right there on the floor of a common room.

As you come forward today, you aren't just receiving a drop of oil. You are stepping into this golden light. You are becoming the "Anointed One" in your own story.

As part of communion today, Peggy and I will be anointing you, if you choose, to remind you of your blessing and connection to heaven right here on earth.

Go forth knowing that the "everyday stuff" of your life is holy. You are marked. You are loved. You are never truly alone. **Amen.**