

“Devotion to Prayer”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 9, 2021

6th Sunday of Easter

Psalm 68:1-10

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 1:6-14

Prayer is important. Luke tells us that the disciples – gathered in an upper room with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers – were “constantly devoting themselves to prayer.” For Luke – both in his gospel and in this second volume, the book of Acts – consistent prayer is a valued aspect of the Christian life.

In chapter 11 of his gospel, Luke told the story of the midnight guest, who knocks on his neighbor’s door, asking for bread to feed a visitor. Even though the neighbor has already locked the door and gone to bed, he will get up and grant this request: not necessarily because they are friends, but because he wants to be left alone. This story seems to teach us about persistence in prayer, but it really shows us *how much more* God will give good gifts to those who ask. Thus, our prayer must not just be persistent, but a constant, consistent faith practice.

On this Mother’s Day, many of us recall how mothers – those of our birth as well as the many other women who helped to nurture us – taught us the meaning of constant prayer. It is so often mothers who are the glue that hold families together; who are devoted to the well-being of their children. Likewise, in the church, it is the women who so often provide daily prayers for its members, ministry and mission; who model loving and caring for so many children and youth.

On Mother’s Day, we give thanks in the church for the ways that women faithfully serve and constantly pray. And we acknowledge that not all of these are or will be mothers. Within the church, there are many different roles and callings. In our particular tradition, we celebrate those women who serve as teachers, preachers, and leaders; acknowledging that God grants all people opportunities and gifts for ministry; including the vital ministry of prayer.

As we discussed last week, the Book of Acts is the story of the church’s birth and early formation. Today, we read the story of the Ascension, where Jesus is lifted up and vanishes into the clouds. This event will not mean the immediate

arrival of the fullness of God's kingdom; the realization of all God's intentions for humanity's well-being. But neither will it mean that Jesus's ministry has ended, or that God's activity to rid the world of oppression and injustice stops. The church – Christ's body re-created on earth, with mission outposts of all different sizes and flavors founded across the globe – gets to work seeking to continue and fulfill Jesus's mission.

Still, this is a funny way to kick off a book about mission. Jesus tells his followers that they will be witnesses to his life, death, and resurrection; spreading the gospel across the face of the earth. Luke describes for us two men in white robes standing by the disciples, just as they had at the tomb of Jesus when the women came on Easter morning. These men echo a similar question to the one asked to the women; a question that basically means, *why are you performing actions that contradict the actions of Jesus?* The women (in Luke) sought the living among the dead; these other disciples at this moment look into the heavens concerned by Jesus' absence rather than looking forward to see his presence.¹

The first great act of the disciples in the book of Acts is to walk back to Jerusalem and let time pass. Eventually, Jesus's followers will begin moving outward and bearing witness to Jesus with the world-altering power of the Holy Spirit; but not yet. For now, his people stay put as they have been instructed.

Presumably, the Holy Spirit could have come immediately after Jesus's Ascension; but God waits. Rather, God has Jesus's followers wait. I like to imagine that in this time of waiting they learn – or begin to learn – that they are to be a responsive community; one that waits upon God to initiate. Whether the disciples walked back to Jerusalem from the Ascension with eager energy or paralyzing fear, we are not told. All we know is that they have to wait.²

Still, the waiting has an active quality to it: going beyond merely sitting around and contemplating the past and future. The group remains sequestered, yet expectant: in constant prayer. In their waiting, they are obeying Jesus' commands. The waiting period conditions them to be attentive to God, so that they might respond when the time is right.

We sometimes imagine that the church should be proactive, rather than reactive. This is the way that many of us prefer to live our lives: anticipating what we will need to do and when; planning for every contingency and detail.

¹ Willie James Jennings, *Acts*, in *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*

² Matthew Skinner from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Obviously, there are some benefits to this approach of being prepared, but both scripture and experience often show us that it is patient attention and constant prayer that allow us to listen to and follow the Spirit's leading.

Who would have imagined, decades ago, that a dairy barn – being used as an illicit casino – might become a church, then a day-care center, and now – years later – repurposed again as the Pass-It-On store; providing clothes, housewares, and furniture to people in need? Who among us might have foreseen the ministers and church leaders – many of them women – who would have been nurtured by and prepared for ministry by this congregation?

Behind – and preceding – any of the actions that this – or any – church takes, is faithful and constant prayer by its members. Prayers offered at home in morning devotions, around dinner tables, in Christian Education classes and bible studies and at youth group gatherings, and in Sunday worship services. In our preschool classrooms, I see children being taught how to pray. I hear of members faithfully checking in on one another and lifting up those in need of healing or support. Almost weekly, I get notes of encouragement in the mail or by email from members telling me I am in their prayers.

A commitment to the practice of prayer means waiting: taking the time and devoting the spiritual energy toward this connection and communication instead of immediately leaping into action. Waiting is not always the best course of action, but in the beginning of the book of Acts, there is nothing else the apostles, the women, and the other followers of Jesus can do. For them, it is a part of learning how to be disciples.³

To live this way – waiting – requires as much courage as if Jesus had told them to go out immediately and change the world. Perils certainly awaited the disciples in active ministry, but there is also a danger in the feeling that you should always be on the move; looking to achieve and accomplish. We are tempted, sometimes, to feed our egos and identities through what we do; and not who and whose we are. As the disciples will come to realize, this waiting period trains them to be attentive and available, so they might respond when the time comes.

There are always reasons not to pray, and not to wait. We keep ourselves busy, we get distracted, and we forget. There are also ample reasons to be anxious as the church. We worry about whether we are making an impact, who will fill

³ Matthew Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*

positions when people step aside, and how we can remain relevant. We sometimes feel as if we are at our neighbor's door, but since it has been locked and everyone has already gone to bed; no matter how persistently we knock, the door will not be answered.

No, waiting is not always the best course of action. Sometimes, people wait because it is too difficult to get moving. But, I'm not sure that is the church's problem; at least, not the church that I know. We tend to be not so much immobilized by fear but, instead, our anxiety places us in perpetual motion; going faster and trying harder. In our constant activity, we sometimes fail to pay attention to how and where God is calling us to respond.

And so, I give thanks for those who are consistent – as much as they are persistent – in prayer. Today, I am especially grateful for all the women, my own mother included, who show such incredible faith in their daily devotion to their faith practices of nurturing and teaching, of caring and hospitality, of patience and prayer. These consistent witnesses have and will continue to be the backbone of the church: the body of Jesus that pays attention to his guidance. Sometimes – and more often we imagine – that means being devoted to prayer. Amen.