

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(January 26, 2014)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: DRAWING NEAR

(Growing in prayer)

Drawing Near, Together

(From the book of Acts)

Study #4

Introduction: Strength in numbers....

The term “strength in numbers” means different things to different people.

- A weightlifter means that strength grows as the number of pounds lifted goes up.
- An economist means that more dollars in circulation is a good thing.
- A politician means that a well-attended rally is better than a small one.
- A person making a moral stand means that he’ll draw strength knowing that he’s not alone.

These days you and I are seeking to grow in our prayer lives. We keep on reminding ourselves that we have the least control over the things that mean the most to us. That realization drives us to despair or to desperately pray.

Well, this morning, we’re going to think about prayer again. We’re desperate for God to do what only He can do. Today, we’re going to consider the beauty of going to our heavenly Father and praying together. Today we’re going to see from Scripture that when it comes to prayer, there is strength in numbers.

Much can be said about the importance of praying alone, by yourself, to God.

We find examples of people praying to God throughout the Bible. But it is also common to find stories of God’s people praying with each other, stories found in the Bible and out of the Bible.

This morning we’ll look closely at three different scenes where believers in Jesus pray together. It is possible that each one of the three prayer-scapes may not relate exactly to where you are right now.

I’m suspicious, though, that for most of us, at least one or two of these compelling stories will speak to us.

All three stories come from the book of Acts, and when we turn to Acts, the book that traces the early growth of the church, we find a group of men and women who had been through a lifetime’s worth of experiences in about two months’ time.

Great Expectations (Acts 1:14ff)

An Apostolic Topsy-Turvy World

Over the course of a few weeks one Spring

After having followed Jesus for about three years, they listened as adoring crowds praised Him while He rode a donkey into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

These disciples walked through the next few days leading up to Passover with Jesus. These were tense days filled with controversy and confrontation.

They ate a Passover meal with Jesus on a Thursday evening, walked with Him to the Garden of Gethsemane, saw Judas’ kiss of betrayal, watched as the soldiers led Him away for trial - and then scattered into the night.

The Friday crucifixion (most of them experienced it from a distance for fear of guilt by association) led to an interminably long Saturday. But when they awoke on the first day of the week (Sunday), it was to news that Jesus had been raised from the dead!

Over the next few days He appeared to all of them. In a Garden in Jerusalem. In an Upper Room. On the road to Emmaus. On the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Over the course of the next forty days He appeared on and off until the day that He again appeared to them for the last time on a hilltop just outside Jerusalem.

One day on a Jerusalem hilltop (Acts 1:6-9)

During that final face-to-face meeting they asked Jesus if He was about to restore the Kingdom to Israel, as in, “*Jesus, are we about to sit on thrones soon?*”

Here is His reply:

[Acts 1:7]... “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; [8] but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

While they were no doubt wondering what in the world THAT meant, ***[9]...He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.***

And to what we say, “*Wow!*”

What a season these disciples have been through. Hopes raised and crushed and then raised again. Devastating loss and confusion followed by unadulterated joy.

And what about that last scene? Jesus promised Holy Spirit power - and then miraculously left, enveloped in a cloud ascending to Heaven.

It would be hard to envision a period of more intense personal disruption than Jesus’ followers experienced during those forty five days between His Triumphal Entry and His ascension into Heaven.

I’ve had seasons of stress, but I’ve never had a month and a half long season like that and I suspect you haven’t either.

If they had been exhausted, looking for nothing but rest, we’d understand. If they had been “up” for nothing but a break, we wouldn’t judge them.

So, we follow them down the slopes of the Mount of Olives to watch what they do following this announcement of yet another soon-to-come radical change.

The remaining eleven apostles, plus women who had followed Jesus, plus a few others were all together in “***the upper room.***”¹

Ten days in an upstairs room (Acts 1:12-14)

[1:12] Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away.² [13] When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is Peter and John and James and Andrew³, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James.

And, as they were there gathered together, what were they doing? Listen.

[14] These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer,⁴ along with the women⁵, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

There was something about those last words of Jesus - more change, no “kingdom” news yet, Holy Spirit power - that captured their imaginations. Those words energized them and gave birth to eagerness.

¹ Likely the upper room where they had all taken the Passover on the night before Jesus died; also the same upper room where they huddled in fear after Jesus died; the same upper room where He appeared to them, passing through a closed door following His resurrection.

² A Sabbath’s day journey was 2,000 cubits, or about 3/5 of a mile.

³ The brothers “Simon and Andrew” and “James and John” are now separated and listed in order of their prominence in Acts “Peter and John and James and Andrew.”

⁴ Literally, “***THE prayer***”

⁵ For the women who had supported Jesus during His ministry, see Mk. 15:40-41; 16:1.

Had they just gone through a really stressful season? Yes. Is it likely that they were beat, emotionally beat up, exhausted. Sure.

But they were eager for what God had in store for their “NEXT.” And that eagerness moved them to pray.

There was such a holy curiosity for what God had up His sleeve (What did *“the power of the Holy Spirit”* mean?!) that they prayed. Fervently. Continually. For ten solid days. Together.

Now, this won’t be for everyone. This may or may not relate to you. I’m confident it will speak to some.

A Topsy-Turvy 2014 for You?

The world of the early disciples had been crazy with ups and downs and twists and turns for a long time. They heard the words of Jesus ringing in their ears and prayed.

Some of you have been through some twists and turns recently. Some of you here today have felt like your life is a roller coaster. You have suffered some losses. You have known a few highs - and lows.

You’re wondering when the train’s gonna stop. When will there be some calm from the storm? No one can answer that question - and Jesus likely won’t answer it, either. He didn’t when the disciples asked Him.

Here is what He says to you.

[Acts 1:7]... “It is not for you to know times or epochs (i.e. - seasons of ease and rest and plenty and peace) which the Father has fixed by His own authority; [8] but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

Is there peace and prosperity coming? I don’t know. But there’s power coming. Is there rest ahead? Maybe. But there is definitely Holy Spirit fire ahead, the chance to shine for your Lord and open doors to serve Him just around the bend!

When you hear Jesus’ words here (or others of His words) you may not know exactly what He has in mind for you, but something stirs. What do you do with that stirring?

Why not respond as God’s people have responded from the earliest days?

For you who have gone through or are going through serious disruption, you will find strength when you get together with a friend or with friends and draw near to God - together.

When the first Christians understood that they were on the cusp of something transformational from God, a breakthrough moment (*“the power of the Holy Spirit”*), they said “Yes” to their instinct to turn to God together in prayer.

The life challenges you are currently facing may be pre-cursors to God’s plan to bring about a sweeping change in your character. He might want to use your disrupted life to point you in a direction of greater usefulness for His Kingdom.

Say “Yes” to your prayer instinct. Find some friends in Christ and pray - together.

That prayer instinct was alive and well in Acts, chapter 1. It remained solidly in place as life in Jesus got rolling.⁶ And here’s the second prayer-scape scene from Acts.

It happened one day, not long after the Day of Pentecost, that Peter and John were walking to the temple at the ninth hour of the day to pray.⁷

⁶ To prove it, listen to this description of the experiences of the first church in Jerusalem. [2:42] *They were continually devoting themselves to the APOSTLES’ TEACHING and to FELLOWSHIP, to the BREAKING of BREAD and to PRAYER.* Scripture doesn’t give us any help at all in determining the form their prayers took, only that they prayed. Only that they were devoted to prayer, together, and that what began in the Upper Room (*“continually devoting themselves to prayer”*) continued as a normal part of life in Jesus.

⁷ We know that they were going to pray because “the ninth hour” of the day was the hour of prayer.

Great Opposition (Acts 3:1--4:31)

A First Century Response to Opposition

Apostles Heal, Speak...Cool their heels in jail (Acts 3:1--4:3)

On the steps leading up to the temple was a lame man, asking for alms. Not having any money to give the man, Peter gave him something else, something much better.

He told him, *[Acts 3:6] “I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene - walk!”*

And just like that, the formerly lame man stood up and went into the temple - walking and leaping and praising God!

The guy was attracting lots of attention, so Peter grabbed the chance to speak about the power of Jesus and preached to the large crowd that had gathered there in the temple.

By the end of that sermon, the count of Christians jumped up to about five thousand, just counting the men. As well, by the end of that sermon Peter and John found themselves in jail, having run afoul of the authorities for crediting Jesus with the healing.⁸

They spent all night in jail and on the next day were brought out to explain how and by what power the miracle had been performed.

Not surprisingly, when asked to explain themselves, Peter just preached Jesus again. He even ended with an invitation to the authorities to trust Christ,

[Acts 4:12] “And there is salvation in non one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”

⁸ The authorities who had arrested Peter and John were trying to squash the Jesus Movement before it picked up much momentum.

Of course, that went over like a lead balloon with those who had masterminded Jesus’ crucifixion just weeks earlier. They commanded Peter and John to not speak any more about Jesus at all!

The apostles’ response was classic. *[Acts 4:19] “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; [20] for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”*

That was Peter and John’s last comment, but the Bible tells us that the authorities *“threatened them further”* (v. 21 - I’ve always imagined this *“further”* threatening looking a lot like a frustrated father’s, *“And this time I’m serious!”*)

Now, while all of that is fascinating and inspiring and great drama, I tell that story to set the stage for what happened next.

Peter and John left the authorities and returned to their Christ-following friends.⁹

They told their friends all had happened - the healing, the jail time, the strict orders to keep quiet.

But they didn’t simply tell the stories and then retreat to a safer approach to life.

NO! The report of Peter and John led to something powerful. It led to PRAYER. Their cares turned into prayers.

In this model prayer, they first focused on God.

Christians turn to God in prayer - together (Acts 4:24-31)

Remembering the God who IS (vv. 24-26)

⁹ They didn’t go back to “the church” of course, because there were no church buildings until sometime in the third century.

[24] And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, “O Lord, it is You who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them, [25] who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said,

**‘Why did the Gentiles rage,
And the peoples devise futile things?
[26] ‘The kings of the earth took their stand,
And the rulers were gathered together
Against the Lord and against His Christ.’”**

They needed to remind themselves of Who was in control of their lives as they gathered in prayer.

So do we. No matter what our most *urgent* need, our *greatest* need is always to see God. We need to see that He is sufficient for our need.

Well, Peter and John have just been imprisoned, publicly humiliated, and threatened with bodily harm. Let’s listen to their prayer.

Begging God for ?????! (vv. 29-30)

[27] “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, [28] to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur. [29] And now, Lord, take note of their threats...

We can hardly fault them for asking that God would take note of the threats against them.

But, they didn’t pray, “*Sic ‘em!*” They also didn’t pray for protection or for safety.

They understood that if Jesus was threatened and reviled and attacked, they would be, too. So, the fact that they were being opposed didn’t surprise them.

So, what did they ask? In the face of opposition, and with the likelihood of more opposition to come, they asked for one thing.

[29] “And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence...

It never seemed to have entered their minds that they would obey the authorities and stop talking about Jesus. No way were they going to do that!

But, if they were going to ignore the court’s order, they knew they would need God’s grace to stay “on mission.”

They would also need God to continue to go before them and perform His life-changing, healing, miraculous works of power!

[30]...while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.”¹⁰

This is the prayer instinct at work again. When threatened and opposed they prayed.

- They PRAYED for an internal work of God - the grace to be bold.
- The Holy Spirit FILLED those who had prayed with that grace.
- They began to SPEAK the word of God boldly, an answer to their fervent prayer.

Again, this won’t speak as clearly to everyone as it will speak to some. But for those who are currently walking in the same shoes as Peter and John, this is about as helpful as it gets.

A 2014 Response to Opposition

If you are facing fears or if threats have been made against you; if you are being opposed for your beliefs and behaviors as a Christ-follower, you can do no better than to gather with friends and pray.

The kinds of prayers we pray together when we are threatened by life’s storms are powerful. The kinds of prayers we pray together when we are standing for Jesus as others are standing against us are generally bolder than the prayers we pray when we are alone.

¹⁰ Note that the apostles didn’t pray for miracles and healings. They prayed for boldness while God continued to perform miracles.

At the end of the prayer in Acts 4, God put an exclamation mark and shook the place where they had gathered.

I don't know if God will shake the place where you gather to pray when you're frightened, but I'm confident He'll shake and strengthen and transform you.

Who knows what kinds of “*signs and wonders*” (4:30) God will send as you pray. Maybe it will be healings or conversions or reconciliations or broken addictions or remade marriages or radically changed lives.

I do know that God loves to hear us pray for His intervention and He loves to hear us pray for boldness. We can count on Him doing something unmistakably “God” when we pray together.¹¹

By all means, when facing life's challenges, pray. Pray with brothers and sisters who will help you in your weakness.

As we come to the home stretch this morning, we'll look at a final scene where Christians come together to pray.

This one is likely to speak to most everybody here. This time, as Christians are praying together, God gives direction for service.

The location is the city of Antioch. The church there was healthy and we're introduced to a group of this church's leaders.

Great Dreams (Acts 13:1-3)

¹¹ We see other glimpses of how important prayer was for the early church as we continue to make our way through Acts. For instance, in Acts 6, we read about how the apostles refused to be distracted from the most important things they could do for the growing church, so they appointed seven faithful men who would serve in other extremely important ways while they themselves gave themselves to prayer (and they did mention prayer first) and to the ministry of the Word. Then, in Acts 12 the church in Jerusalem held an all-night prayer vigil for another release from jail for the Apostle Peter. Herod had just put James (the apostle) to death, and seeing that this pleased some people, he arrested Peter, no doubt to put him to death, too. Much to the surprise of the praying church, God answered their prayers and miraculously released Peter from the jail in the middle of the night, while the prayer meeting for his release was still going on.

Godly Church Leaders at Antioch

[1] Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

The five men listed here were probably chief among those who instructed the church in the fundamentals of the faith. They were the “go-to” spiritual leaders.¹²

These five (and maybe others) were praying.

Directed While at Prayer (v. 2)

[2] While they were ministering¹³ to the Lord and fasting...

This word “*ministering*” is a word that describes what priests did in the Temple. It involved prayer and singing - the same things that we do today when we come together to worship.

And these guys were fasting, too, as we also sometimes do today.¹⁴

While they were worshiping the Lord, they were given direction.

[2] While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart¹⁵ for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

¹² And what a list of ethnic diversity! Here is a Hellenistic Jew, an African, a Romanized Jew, an aristocrat, and a trained rabbi. Yet despite their disparate backgrounds, these men harmonized beautifully, a real testimony to the unifying influence of the Gospel. Obviously, one of the Holy Spirit's most amazing works is to bring unity out of diversity in the church.

¹³ The word we translate “ministering” is not the same word as is usually translated “serving” although it relates to serving God. It is a “stained glass” word, the word from which we derive our English word “liturgy.” People who are “ministering to the Lord” are performing spiritual service to God.

¹⁴ The combination of the activities of prayer and fasting occurs occasionally in Scripture. (Jeremiah 14:12; Nehemiah 1:4; Matthew 6:5, 16).

It is clear that the Holy Spirit clearly communicated to these guys while they were praying. Among those who come to this passage there is no consensus or definitive answer to the question “*HOW did the Holy Spirit say what He said?*”.

Here are some of the suggestions offered.

- He gave identical simultaneous inner urges to each of those praying.
- He spoke audibly, as God did when Jesus was baptized, or as when Jesus spoke to Paul on the road to Damascus.
- He spoke through one or more of the prophets in the church.
- He spoke through the “one mind” of those praying that this action was the right action to take.

Honestly, we don’t know how the Holy Spirit spoke. But the “How” is not all-important. And to get distracted by the “How?” question is to lose the forest for the trees. The church at Antioch clearly understood that God had given direction. They followed the Spirit’s direction.

The Spirit wanted Barnabas and Saul, two of the church’s greatest people resources, to leave the church for a season to spread the Gospel.

It takes a little more than twenty seconds to thoughtfully read Acts 13:1-2. We read it pretty quickly. There is no telling how many hours, days, weeks, or even months of praying is represented by those two verses.

But in the end, it was clear that Barnabas and Saul were to leave Antioch and go to parts unknown with the message of Jesus.

Prayed For and Commissioned by the Church

When everybody was convinced of the plan, they laid their hands on Barnabas and Saul to commission them, prayed for them, and then [3] *they sent them away.*”

The next thing Luke write is this: [4] *So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit...*

OK, Luke, which is it? Did the church send them out or did the Holy Spirit send them out?

I think Luke would tell us, “*Yes.*”

Churches are not just places or communities for worship and fellowship. Churches are also missional communities that are to carry God’s heart for people to the world.

When we read that both the church and the Holy Spirit sent Barnabas and Saul out, we are to understand that when a church (after prayer and fasting?), discerns (through whatever means - consensus, a realization of what is “ministry smart”, direct revelation) that the thing to do is to engage in a particular ministry initiative, and they commission people and resources for that purpose, then you can just as easily say the church did it or the Holy Spirit did it.

Here at Northwest we are interested in seeing everybody “on mission” for Jesus’ Great Commission. There is no better strategy for discerning what each one’s role in that great adventure is than to seek His direction, together, in earnest, desperate, fervent prayer.

Conclusion:

So, to review...

- As the disciples waited for the arrival of the Holy Spirit, according to the promise of Jesus (Acts 1:8), they **prayed** together (Acts 1:13-14)
- As they pondered how to bring back the number of apostles to an even dozen after the death of Judas Iscariot, they **prayed** together (Acts 1:24-26)
- Immediately after tasting their first persecution for speaking out about Jesus, they turned to the Lord, together, in **prayer** (Acts 4:23-35)
- After the congregation had selected seven men to serve as servants in the early church, the apostles laid their hands on them, commissioning them, but only after they had **prayed** for them. (Acts 6:3-6)
- When Simon Peter was arrested by Herod the church immediately convened a special **prayer meeting** to beg God for Peter’s release from prison (Acts 12:1-17)

¹⁵ In his writings, Paul mentions being set apart three times: First, at his birth (Galatians 1:15); Second, at his conversion (Romans 1:1); Third, here, to specific service.

- After the Holy Spirit had made it clear that He wanted Barnabas and Saul to go out with the Gospel to places who had never heard of Jesus, the church at Antioch **prayed** for them. (Acts 13:1-3)
- When Paul and Silas found themselves in prison in Philippi for having preached the Word with miracle-working power from God, they worshipped while in prison with song and **prayer** (Acts 16:25-30)
- Before Paul left the city of Ephesus for Jerusalem, he and the church gathered at the beach for a time of **prayer** together (Acts 20:36-38)
- On this same journey, Paul stopped off at the city of Tyre, met with the Christian disciples who all warned him to not go to Jerusalem - and then **prayed** with them on the beach, just as they had done at Ephesus (Acts 21:1-6)

I think we can see a pattern.¹⁶

I have a really hard time picturing, in any of these scenes, somebody standing up and saying, *“You know, we really ought to pray about this.”* I think it was far more an organic response to the prayer instinct of children of God running to their Father. Nothing awkward about it.

I can’t imagine it ever felt “forced.” It was a natural turning to God out of desperation that He would do what only He could do.

It was people like us, eager for what He had for them NEXT. It was people like us crying out to Him for grace to be faithful and bold despite opposition. It was people like us earnestly seeking how best to serve Him HERE and NOW.

That nudge you sense from time to time to say to your friend, *“Let’s pray now”* is a Holy Spirit inspired nudge that Christians have always sensed. Give in to the nudge.

When your friend is telling you about a challenge he’s facing, rather than assure him that you’ll pray for him, break out in prayer IN THE MOMENT. Twenty seconds. Doesn’t have to be a sermon. Just take your friend’s need to God.

¹⁶ And let’s not forget the times in the letters when believers are called to pray together, as in James 5, where we are told to confess our sins and pray for each other’s healing.

Don’t miss out on what has been a basic Christian experience since Pentecost. Pray. Brothers and sisters, let us pray - together.