

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon Series: On Mission

The Church at Prayer

(selected passages from Acts)

Introduction: Changing Media; A changeless MISSION...

A couple of weeks ago, in an article about the rising popularity of ebooks, The Wall Street Journal quoted Henry Ford, who once said, "*If I had given America what it wanted, I would have given it a faster horse.*"

Instead, Ford gave America something that replaced the horse - the automobile.

In the same way, today Amazon (Kindle), Sony (Sony Reader), Panasonic (Words Gear) and others are giving Americans, not faster books, but a way to carry a readable library in the palm of our hands.

With books going electronic, personal libraries that take up several bookshelves are becoming obsolete. People like me, who have grown up with books, may mourn the passing of paper and bindings. But, I suppose I'll learn to curl up with a good gadget. It'll be OK.

The thing is, the medium may change, but the message is the thing.

I could enjoy Tom Clancey or Donald Miller or Thomas Friedman on a reader. The message would be the same.

Currently, I have my Bible on my Palm Tungsten - and am as motivated by the message I read and the mission I am given when I read Paul THERE as I am when I read him in my big burgundy leather bound BIBLE.

It's not the medium. It's the message. The message that points to the mission is the thing.

And the message of Jesus, giving the church its mission will be our focus for the next three Sundays.

It's been some time since we've given ourselves to a consideration of our church's Mission.

At Northwest, we are motivated by God's grace. As Paul puts it ***[Romans 5:8]...God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.***

Our understanding of our mission is this: *In response to this great love we intend to become a community who submit to God's inspired Word so that we may passionately pursue life-changing relationships with God, with each other, and with our world.*

Jesus' three named statements have informed us as to our three fold mission.

- The Great Commandment tells us to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength. (life-changing relationship with God - WORSHIP))
- The New Commandment tells us to love each other as He loved us. (life-changing relationships with each other - LOVING COMMUNITY)
- The Great Commission tells us to make disciples of all the nations. (life-changing relationships with our world - EVANGELISM AND WORLD VISION)

For the next three Sundays, we'll think together about the purpose of our church.

We'll start off by considering the idea that we intend to increasingly become a church that is all about God, worship, prayer. That we have and that we nurture a life-changing relationship with God.

I'm choosing only three of a great number of passages I could choose to highlight the primacy of prayer in the lives of the first Christians in the early church.

Our first glimpse takes us to the first part of the book of Acts where we see the church at prayer **in community**.

COMMUNITY Prayer (Acts 2)

Backstory...

Jesus' ascension

Luke's history of the church (The Acts of the Apostles) began as Jesus was preparing to ascend to Heaven from the Mount of Olives, a hill located just outside of Jerusalem.

In response to His disciples' question, Jesus assured them that He was not about to tell them when He was going to set up the Kingdom, [8] ***"BUT"*** He said, ***"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."***

After these words, Jesus was lifted up to Heaven while the disciples were watching.

Two angels appeared next to them and promised that some day - and this still hasn't happened! - Jesus would come back to earth, as visibly and as physically as His departure had been.

The disciples returned to the city of Jerusalem, and went back to the upper room where they were all staying. There were one hundred and twenty disciples at this time, most of them probably having seen the resurrected Jesus before He ascended to Heaven.

The disciples wait

For the next several days after Jesus' departure these disciples were [14] ***continually devoting themselves to prayer.***

They replaced Judas with Matthias to fill out the ranks of the apostolic group at an even dozen again¹ and then waited and prayed until the Day of Pentecost, when the whole group made their way to the Temple

¹ With Judas gone, the apostles who were left realized that they needed to replace him. They somehow know that they should maintain the same number of apostles that the Lord Himself had originally chosen. Although, clearly they didn't select a new apostle every time one of the original twelve died! Judas' case was different,

PENTECOST!

Once in the Temple precincts, the promised Holy Spirit was poured out on them in power!

There was the sound of a great rushing wind² and tongues as of fire resting on the heads of each of the disciples. Visitors heard unschooled Galileans praising God, and praising Him in languages that these Galileans had never learned!³

These visitors, who had come to Jerusalem from countries near and far were totally bewildered. Some were convinced that the disciples were drunk, others couldn't even hazard a guess as to what was happening.

So Simon Peter got himself to a place where he could be heard and addressed the thousands of people gathered at the outer court of the Temple to explain things.

Peter preached

His opening words were tongue-in-cheekish.

"You're right. We aren't quite ourselves this morning. We are being controlled by a foreign substance of sorts. But, that substance isn't fresh wine. It is the Holy Spirit of God!"

Identifying what was happening as having been clearly predicted by the prophet Joel, Peter went on to preach Jesus as boldly and as clearly as he could.

Many of the people Peter was speaking to had seen Jesus' miracles and had heard His teachings. Many of them had been in Jerusalem fifty days earlier when He had been crucified. Many of them knew full well about the rumors of His resurrection.

disqualified as he had been from the apostolic Ring of Honor by death and defection.)

² Not "breezy" - this is the sound of a great, rushing wind. You have heard about tornadoes sounding like freight trains. Imagine that noise.

³ Several commentators, including William Barclay, flatly deny that the miracle of being able to speak with foreign languages happened.

And, as Peter laid all of this out to the crowd - Jesus was God's Man! Jesus performed miracles! Jesus is Lord! YOU are responsible for Jesus' death! Jesus is alive! - they were [37] *pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?"*

Peter directed them to turn to the Jesus they had rejected. *"Repent! You thought Jesus was a common criminal. Now, accept Him for the God/Man that He is! Put your whole trust in Jesus!"*

The multitudes are CONVERTED (v. 41)

[41] So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.⁴

And can you even begin to imagine the impact in the city of Jerusalem as three thousand people openly identified with the recently crucified Jesus!? It turned the city upside down.

The Jewish leaders would have been beside themselves. The Man they had worked to get rid of and whose crucifixion they had orchestrated, was now having more influence DEAD than He had when He was ALIVE!⁵

THIS was the birth of the church. Church membership jumped from nothing to 3,000+ over the course of one morning worship service.

And life in Jerusalem would never be the same. Life for these newborn-again believers would never be the same. Their interaction with each other would never be the same.

⁴ We are never told how many people were actually in the crowd all together. But, out of the total crowd, three thousand people repented of their previous mind concerning Jesus, and came to understand that He was the Lord and Messiah. Three thousand placed their trust in Jesus. Three thousand submitted to baptism to publicly identify with Jesus.

⁵ Through the apostolic witness Jesus acquired more followers in one day than in the whole of His public ministry. This seems to me to be part of what the Lord meant when He said, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father."* (John 14:12)

Now remember, the church AS OF THE DAY OF PENTECOST was made up mostly of strangers, men and women and young people who didn't know each other, many of whom hailed from different countries, and (aside from their Jewishness) had little in common.

But what we read about in verse 42 comes across as more of a family reunion than a gathering of strangers.

The Learning, Loving, Worshiping, Praying Community (vv. 42)

[42] And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to PRAYER (emphasis added).

We aren't surprised by any of this.

Their devotion to the apostles' teaching makes sense. The new converts would have wanted to learn as much as they could about Jesus and His ways from the apostles who had been with Him for three years.

Their fellowship/shared life sounds wonderful and loving. The early church took pains to see that they met each others' needs. They were sharing possessions and selling property to provide for each other, living, as they were, as aliens in Jerusalem.

They ate their meals together. And there was a worship component to this breaking of bread. Sharing food and drink gave them an opportunity to remember the Lord in impromptu Communion services held throughout the city.

AND THEY PRAYED. It was perfectly natural for these brothers and sisters to pray together. When they saw each other on the street, they prayed. When they met in homes, they prayed. When they gathered to worship, they prayed.

And this is what the Lord Jesus wants to see us do today as His church. Certainly, pay attention to the apostles' teaching. Certainly share our lives with each other (and we'll talk about that next Sunday!). Certainly enjoy meals and remember Jesus together. And certainly PRAY.

Pray is to be central to what we are all about here in the church. Prayer is a crucial part of how we relate to each other if we are going to relate to each other at the depth Jesus intends us to.

Now, if prayer is to be a commonplace occurrence between Christians as we interact under the Lordship of Jesus, there will also be those times when we engage in prayer, together, in response to a critical situation.

Turn in your Bibles to Acts, chapter 4, for a picture of the church at prayer in crisis.

After enjoying a few weeks of honeymoon-like bliss, the church encountered the cold, hard reality of persecution in the form of an overnight jail sentence for two of its early leaders.

CRISIS Prayer (Acts 4)

Backstory... (vv. 1-22)

Miracle at the Temple

As the apostles Peter and John made their way to the Temple to worship one day, they passed by a beggar asking for money.

Instead of giving money, though, Peter proclaimed healing in the name of Jesus.

[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!”

It was an incredible miracle - and people flocked to the Temple as word spread about what had happened. Peter, a true preacher at heart, recognized an opportunity when he saw one, and began speaking to the gathered crowd.

Speaking much as he had on the Day of Pentecost, he preached Jesus. There were similar results as thousands more Jews turned to Jesus.

This time, though, the next verses don't tell us of wonderful fellowship. This time, we read about an arrest.

Apostolic arrest leads to opportunity!

Peter and John were both arrested by Jewish leaders and were brought before the Jewish High Court (the Sanhedrin) the next day.

The Chief Priest, Annas, and Caiaphas his son-in-law, brought the apostles out for questioning.⁶

It is likely that Peter and John were placed in the center of a semicircle, which was the seating arrangement for the Sanhedrin.⁷

And the question the Chief Priest asked provided all the invitation Peter needed to AGAIN preach Jesus! Having just been filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter evangelized the Jewish Sanhedrin!

The final words of Peter's min-message were these: ***[12] And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.***

Now, I've got to believe that the Sanhedrin was shocked beyond words to have heard Peter talking like this. After all, the last view they had of Peter was of his backside as he ran away into the night after denying Jesus three times! (see Luke 22)

What a change has come over Peter now! Officially, he and John were the defendants at this trial. But, this defendant took the offensive! And Peter's answer to the Court's question shows, not his backside, but his backbone.

He has been arrested, but he didn't plead for mercy. He didn't use "guarded language" so as to convince the Sanhedrin to go easy on him and his fellow apostle, John.

⁶ Annas (the father) and Caiaphas were the rulers during the Sanhedrin's trial of Jesus.

⁷ Verse 14 implies that the healed man was standing right there with them, perhaps meaning that he had been locked up with them overnight.

An engaging dialogue...

They sort of remind us of Jesus

Here was Simon Peter, an uneducated man, not schooled in rabbinic ways, handling Scripture very adeptly. And, as if a light bulb went off in their minds, a thought began running through their minds -

“Let’s see, who else have we known who had no formal theological training but was very skillful in the use of Scripture? Who else did we know who had such confidence, even when standing before us, even though we had the power to do with Him whatever we wished?”

And the members of the Sanhedrin realized that while they thought they had removed the thorn from their side by killing Jesus, He was only reproducing Himself in His disciples. Their “Jesus problem” hadn’t gone away - it was multiplying!

So, while in full retreat, they used the authority of their position and issued a cowardly command.

Stop talking about Jesus!

[18] And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

When people in power are in danger of losing that power, a normal response is to bluster. Sounding like a father who has lost his cool (Happy Father’s Day!), these men blustered, *“No more talking about Jesus! And we mean it - or else!”*

Was Peter cowed? Again, not exactly.

Peter and John: “We don’t think so...”

Showing what a difference the Holy Spirit’s presence makes in a person’s life, Peter looked these guys square in the eye - and said, *“Thanks for your input, gentlemen. But, I don’t think so.”*

[19] But Peter and John answered and said to them, ‘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.’

With one more threat⁸, the Council released Peter and John and the two apostles made their way back to the church.

Now, of course, when I say, they made their way back to the church, I don’t mean that they went back to the Jerusalem equivalent of 8900 Guilbeau.

There was no church building - in fact, for the explosive first three centuries of the church’s history, there is no record of a church building existing.

But there was a church. And at a time of undeniable crisis, Peter and John went back to the people who made up the church, their brothers and sisters in Christ!

CRISIS! Time to Pray!!

A watershed moment

This was a watershed moment for the church. It was their first moment of opposition. Jesus told them it would come, but this was the first time they actually experienced it.

Peter and John had spent a night in JAIL. They slept in JAIL - maybe with criminals. They were ordered to stop speaking about Jesus by those they had always before obeyed and respected. They had been ***“threatened further”*** (v. 21) and we don’t know what those further threats had been - but I’m sure they weren’t pleasant.

⁸ ***[21] When they had threatened them further, they let them go (finding no basis on to punish them) on account of the people, because they were all glorifying God for what had happened; [22] for the man was more than forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.***

They realized that if the message of Jesus was going to continue to roll forward, from this point on it would be hard. Spreading the word would, from now on, be a challenge. Evangelizing was going to exact a toll.

And they were perfectly aware of the stakes involved. Exhaustion and danger and suffering would be just around the corner, but faithfulness to Jesus was the issue, the eternal souls of people hung in the balance.

So Peter and John and the rest of the church came together. And what did they do when they came together? They prayed.

Crisis invites prayer

Point One: GOD! (v. 24)

They get points for recognizing a crisis when they saw one.

After reporting to the church all that had happened (see verse 23), they all **[24] lifted their voices to God with one accord** and prayed.

The beginning of their prayer was God.

[4:24] 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

Did they have needs? You bet they did! But they knew better than to begin in prayer by focusing on their needs. Jesus had taught them to pray by beginning with God. **“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name...”**

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

Then, they told God all that they were facing.

Point Two: Our Desperate Plight! (4:25-28)

[4:25] 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.’

[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.

If it seems funny that they should tell God, in prayer, all that they were facing, you should know that it is VERY frequent in the Bible that people tell God, in prayer, what they are facing.

- Abraham told God all about his childlessness (God already knew Abraham was childless.)
- King Hezekiah prayed for the safety of Jerusalem, rolling out the scroll of the letter the Assyrian General, Rabshakeh, had written to that God could see it. (God already knew what the letter said.)
- Nehemiah prayed about the bad situation Jerusalem was in, giving details about the burned down walls (God knew that the walls were burned.)

Why do the prayer warriors of the Bible do this? Well, it’s not to inform *God*. It is to remind *themselves* that they are in a desperate situation, a situation in which, if God doesn’t come through, they are sunk!

They recount how bad things are to deny themselves the possibility of living in denial. They speak of their situation to God to remind themselves that they are helpless and hopeless unless God acts.

God is not bored when you tell Him what is going on in your life any more than a loving mom is bored when her child tells her what happened in his day or an involved father is bored when his child tells him how tough things are for her. God wants us to express ourselves to Him!

But, the purpose of laying out the background of our situation to God is most important as it relates to our intention to ASK GOD FOR SOMETHING.

And that is where the prayer meeting of Acts 4 is heading. These Christians intend to ask God for something. What do you think they are going to ask Him?

They have just been imprisoned, publicly humiliated and threatened with bodily harm. What would you ask? Listen to their prayer.

Point Three: Please ACT, Lord! (vv. 29-30)

[29] And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and GRANT THAT YOUR BOND-SERVANTS MAY SPEAK YOUR WORD WITH ALL CONFIDENCE [30] while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.⁹

This prayer has always fascinated me for its total lack of self-concern. They didn't pray for protection. They didn't pray for safety. They didn't pray for a break.

They seemed to understand that if Jesus was threatened and reviled and attacked, they would be, too. So, the fact that they were being opposed neither SURPRISED nor DERAILED them.

What did they ask? That in the face of opposition, and with the likelihood of more opposition to come, they would be granted the boldness and confidence to continue proclaiming the Word!

It never seemed to have entered their heads that they might obey the dictates of the Sanhedrin and stop talking about Jesus. No way were they going to do that!

But, they knew they would need boldness from God to stay the course. So THAT is what they asked for (as they assumed that God would continue to pave the way for their message by His own miracles and healings)!

⁹ It should be noted that technically, the apostles didn't pray for miracles and healings. They prayed for boldness while God continued to perform miracles.

The first century Christians get points for recognizing a crisis when they saw one. And we will do well to recognize crises - present and looming - and respond to them as the first church did: with prayer.

The early church prayed as a part of community life. They prayed in response to crisis. As well, they prayed for wisdom and direction from God.

To view the church at prayer in this regard, we change venues.

Thus far, we've been in Jerusalem, dealing with a church that was entirely Jewish. Now, we move about four hundred miles north to the city of Antioch, where we find a church that is comprised of both Jews and Gentiles.

Right off the bat we are introduced to five of the leaders of the church at Antioch.

COMMISSIONING Prayer (Acts 13)

Backstory...

The players

[1] Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers¹⁰: Barnabas¹¹, and Simeon who was called Niger,¹² and Lucius of Cyrene,¹³ and Manaen¹⁴ who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.¹⁵

¹⁰ I note that there are multiple men listed, as there is always a multiplicity of leaders in any healthy church.

¹¹ First mentioned is **Barnabas** (the son of encouragement) we already know as a hero of the first century church. It may be that he was listed first because he was a representative of the Jerusalem church ministering in Antioch.

¹² Then, there is **Simeon**, whose nickname was "Niger." Taken from the same root word as the African country named Nigeria, the Latin word means "black." Some believe that this "Simeon" was the Simon of Cyrene mentioned in Mark

¹³ Next mentioned is **Lucius** of Cyrene. Cyrene was a city in North Africa. Lucius' name is Latin, indicating Roman roots. How did he come to be in Antioch? Several have guessed that he was in Jerusalem when the initial persecution against Christians hit (after Stephen's martyrdom), and, forced to flee, he made his way to Antioch in Asia Minor.

These five probably represented the two groups Luke lists in verse one: prophets and teachers. Their job was to instruct the church in the fundamentals of the faith. They were the “go-to” spiritual leaders.

And what a list they make! A Hellenistic Jew, an African, a Romanized Jew, an aristocrat, a trained rabbi.

Yet despite their disparate backgrounds, these men functioned in unity in one local church, highlighting the unifying influence of the Gospel in a way nothing else could have done.¹⁶

And what are these church leaders doing as we meet them? They are praying.

The players are pray-ers

[2] While they were ministering¹⁷ to the Lord and fasting...

¹⁴ Then comes **Manaen**. This fellow was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He hob-nobbed with royalty, as is seen by the fact that he was “brought up with” (raised with) Herod the Tetrarch (another way to refer to Herod Antipas). Manaen = comforter = Hebrew “Menachem” thus indicating that he was a Jew. This Herod was the one who ruled over Galilee and Perea between 4 B.C. and A.D. 39 - that is, during Jesus’ ministry. He was the one who had consented to the death of John the baptizer, making him the second husband of Herodias and step-father of Salome. He was also the one who treated Jesus so shamefully at His trial. (Luke 23:7-12). Having a childhood pal in the Herod family probably indicates that Manaen came from society’s upper crust.

¹⁵ And finally, Luke mentions **Saul**, whom we know as well as we know Barnabas. A violent persecutor of the church, he was saved in a blinding encounter with the risen Lord Jesus. He was welcomed by Ananias in Damascus, sponsored by Barnabas in Jerusalem, rescued from threat of death by the church and sent away home to Tarsus. Now, he has been brought back to Antioch by Barnabas where he is recognized as one of the church’s primary teachers.

¹⁶ One of the Holy Spirit’s most amazing works is to bring unity out of diversity in the church. And He did that spectacularly in the church at Antioch.

¹⁷ 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 praying, performing spiritual service to God.

It is my personal opinion that there is probably a larger group in view than the five men listed in verse one. Those five men are, perhaps, representative of the church as a whole that was praying and fasting.

And they are not praying in response to a calamity or a crisis.

They are praying, I would imagine, for vision.

I’ve wondered if that church was beginning to sense its evangelistic responsibility for her neighbors. I’ve long thought that they had gathered to pray because of a burden, a deep passion to fulfill the Great Commission Jesus gave.

I know that we aren’t told that this is why they were praying. But I think it is clear that this is what driving their prayer because of the answer the Holy Spirit provides.

[2] While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart¹⁸ for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’”

Antioch was blessed with a powerful expression of the church in its day. They were a healthy melting pot of humanity, made one in Jesus. And they prayed that God would be pleased to direct them into Great Commission ministry.

God answered - and the result was the first missionary venture organized by a church, the development of Saul of Tarsus into the Apostle Paul and the growth of a missionary strategy that reached much of the known world of the first century.

Surely if we sought the Lord in similar fashion, He would be pleased to direct us into just as great Kingdom impact as He did them?

Brothers and sisters, let us pray!

¹⁸ 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.