

Scripture: Acts 1:12-14
Message: Joined in Prayer
May 13, 2018; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON
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There was a father who had two daughters.

One daughter would wake up every morning and kneel beside her bed to give thanks for a new day and to pray for the events of the day ahead. Included in that prayer were names of people in her circle whom she brought to God for special blessing.

At the end of the day, this daughter again knelt beside her bed and prayed through a long list of names and needs, entrusting these people and events to God's care and blessing.

Throughout the day, this daughter would pause to pray in between her particular routines or activities, stopping to focus time in prayer to God.

The other daughter would wake up every morning and thank God for a new day while she got dressed and again as she sat down for breakfast. On the way to work she thought through her schedule for the day, asking God to help her and guide her through. There were expressions of "thank you, God" and "show me more, God" and "Wow, God" in different moments and conversations as part of her work day.

At night, she lay down and thanked God for a good day, remembering some particular items, praying for family, and falling asleep before actually saying 'Amen.'

There was a father who had two daughters. Which of the daughters was faithful in prayer? Which of the daughters had a prayer life?

This sermon has been a difficult sermon for me to write. There has been some personal struggle with this whole idea of the practice of prayer, which I know is shared by others. Even for those who have lived a lifetime believing in God, prayer can be an enormous challenge. It doesn't come naturally to everyone, myself included. Real prayer is hard work that involves the mind, the soul, the heart, and the will. It also demands a certain amount of bodily concentration. This isn't always easy.

As I look at my own life, I will confess that I pray more often in fits and starts. There are times when I feel I am boldly standing before the throne of God and other times when I have to remind myself to take time to go there. I have struggled to understand, or try to practice, what it means to "pray without ceasing." I hesitate to speak this way because this may disappoint some people who have a different image of a Pastor. I also hesitate because I

know that not everyone shares my experience.

I believe that God gives some people the gift of prayer just like he gives others the gift of music or the gift of artistry, or the gift of listening. There are those who know how to pray the way some people know how to make beautiful music on the organ, or draw inspiring scenes, or quietly listen as others share their struggles. I know that there are believers who pray for several hours each day. It is hard for me to know what to say about that except that I stand in amazement at such a gift and such a dedication to God.

I also know that God doesn't gift all his children in the same way. It's comforting to know that one teaches, another sings, another cooks, another serves on a committee, another leads a music team, another writes to the missionaries, another prays. And so it goes. We are not all alike, which is good because how boring the church would be if we all were the same. Even if you don't have a particular gift, you can learn from those who do.

I say all this so that you will know that as I preach on this text about prayer, I'm also talking to myself. When you point a finger at someone else, it always means you have three fingers pointing back at yourself. That certainly is true this morning.

In Acts 1, we read about Jesus ascending into heaven. Before he ascends, he gives a promise of power to his followers, along with instructions to be witnesses. Those followers return from the Mount of Olives and go to Jerusalem. In Luke 24 we read that they were in the temple in worship. In Acts 1 we read that they were "joined together constantly in prayer." There was time for worship and time for prayer. What does it mean to be "joined together constantly in prayer"?

Does it mean that only prayer that takes place with a group of people together is what we are expected to do? Is that what "together" means?

Does it mean that we should be having a weekly or even daily time where we come and meet together to pray? Is that what "constantly" means?

If so, then some might say that we are not a praying church. Sure, we pray at meetings and worship services and Bible studies, but is that what "constantly" means?

Or does "constantly" include being a people for whom prayer is an important part of our relationship of thankfulness to God and there are regular or frequent times of prayer as part of our day?

Does "together" mean being in physical proximity, or does it mean agreeing together to

pray and being made aware of the items to bring to God in prayer?

If you were to do a study of the Greek word that is translated “together,” you would find that this word is a favourite of Luke. He uses it ten times and it occurs only once elsewhere in the New Testament. It could mean simply that the disciples met in the same place, or were doing the same thing, namely praying. But it later describes both united prayer or praying “as one voice” (4:24), and a united decision or being in agreement (15:25). The “togetherness” that is implied seems to go beyond mere assembly and activity, or being in the same place. It can also suggest being in agreement, together, about what they were praying for. They prayed “with one mind or purpose or impulse.”

They “joined constantly.” This particular verb translates a word that means to be busy or persistent. Luke uses in reference to the new converts who “devoted themselves to” (or joined constantly to, busy or persistent with) the apostles’ teaching (2:42). He also uses it of the apostles who determined to give priority to (join constantly in, be persistent or busy with) prayer and preaching (6:4). In this reference in Acts 1, he uses it of persistence in prayer. The apostle Paul also uses it in this way, for example in Romans 12:12, “be faithful (constantly) in prayer,” and Colossians 4:2, “Devote yourselves (join constantly) in prayer.”

Joined together. Coming to a place of one mind. Coming to agreement on serving God in this place. Being of one mind that God’s purpose is more important than our own personal agenda. United in the desire to listen to God’s leading and to follow him as his people together.

Think about an orchestra playing music that is lovely and lilting and then without warning, a violin screeches a wrong note. The discordant sound sticks out like a sore thumb. When the early church prayed, there were no “wrong notes”—no ugly attitudes, no pointing fingers, no pity parties, no gossip stories, no secrets told behind closed doors.

When people don’t like each other, they can’t join together in prayer for very long. Either you’ll stop criticizing or you’ll stop praying because you can’t do both at the same time.

Do you want this to be a church that is joined together constantly in prayer? Let’s consider a relational inventory: Everyone forgiven? Any restitutions to be done? Any need to communicate healing to anyone? As a congregation we can experience the power of God when we are of one mind and heart, when we love each other as Christ has loved us, and when we heal broken relationships. The price seems high! But it’s a bargain price for what

can happen through Pentecost power.

Being joined together in unity is one of God's best gifts. If we have it, the church will be blessed in every way. If we lose it, how hard it is to get it back again. I would dare to say that there is a spirit of unity in this congregation. That is not our doing and is not to our credit, but the glory belongs entirely to the Lord. Let us be grateful and strive in the Spirit to maintain and strengthen the unity he has given us. If we do, there is no limit to what God can do through us.

“Joined together constantly in prayer.” What does this mean for us as individuals and as a church? Let me suggest some questions: With whom do you pray on a regular basis? Do you have a prayer partner? How often do you meet with a small group where you pray together? Who prays with you and for you day by day? Is God calling you to encourage a growing prayer ministry in this church, providing opportunities to be “joined together constantly in prayer”?

In his sermon on this text, James Montgomery Boice comments that the disciples might have left the Mount of Olives and used their time in other ways. They could have gone back to their old occupations or they might have started doing the work of evangelism. That's understandable because most of us are people of action. We want to get moving, to do something, anything, but for goodness sake, don't just sit there; get up and get going. Don't let life pass you by.

We might feel the same way about our church, or our life. Something has to happen. We need to reach more people, do something more, get going. Or we need to make a decision in our own life, make a change, do something. And we're ready to march ahead.

Sometimes prayer is seen as 'doing nothing.' We're just praying; that's not action. Or is it? Is it an act of waiting on the Lord? Can it be the sharing of, or finding our unified voice?

What does a praying church look like?

There was a father who had two daughters. From my earlier example, I would suggest that both daughters had a trust in God and a prayer life, expressed in different ways. How is God calling us, calling me, to respond to his word today?

With whom are you, or will you, join together in prayer? With whom do you, or will you, join to pray constantly?

As your pastor I am making the commitment to answer those questions. May God bless us to grow together as a praying church.

Amen.