

*A House of Prayer*  
**Matthew 21:12-13; Acts 1-4**  
John Breon

After entering Jerusalem in triumph, Jesus went into the temple and drove out the merchants and money changers there. He quoted Isaiah 56:7 as part of his reason for this act: "My house will be called a house of prayer." God's intention for the temple was that it would be a house of prayer for all nations, all people (Isaiah 56:7). The religious leaders in Jesus' day had neglected this purpose of the temple. They had made it a "den of robbers" instead (Matthew 21:13; Jeremiah 7:11).

For the Jews, the temple was God's house. And God's house was to be a house of prayer—a place of prayer for all people. In the New Testament, Jesus begins to take the place of the temple. Then the church, the body of Christ, is seen as God's temple. Listen to this: "As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:4-5).

The church is God's house. Remember, the building is not the church. The people are the church. The community of faith is the house of God. We are the house of God. If the original temple was to be a house of prayer, don't you think we are to be a house of prayer? Part of God's call to us is to be a church of prayer.

We've talked about the United Methodist Church's mission statement: To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The process for making disciples is sometimes called the church's "primary task": reaching and receiving people, relating them to God, nurturing them as disciples, and sending them out in service and witness. Underlying that task and motivating it is an even more basic task: prayer. Prayer, intimate communion and communication with God, is the church's priority. It's our life. Henri Nouwen says that praying is not one of many things the church does. Prayer is the church's very being. When prayer is no longer our primary concern, and when we fail to see our many activities as part of

prayer itself, the church quickly declines into a club with a common cause but no common calling (*Reaching Out* 156).

Richard Foster, commenting on the church as a house of prayer, says that too often churches are places for anything but prayer. "True, we need to have our business meetings and our committee meetings and our Bible studies and our self-help groups and our worship services, but if the fire is not hot at the center, these things are only ashes in our hands" (*Prayer* 197).

I once heard a sermon called "How to Build an Awe-Full Church." A fifth grader had been reading the book of Acts and saw where it says the early church was full of awe. So he said to the pastor, "This is an awe-full church."

Part of what made the early church awe-full is that they were a praying church. The early chapters of Acts show those first followers of Jesus in prayer. As they were praying, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and formed into the church. They became active in ministry and witness to those around them. Let's take a look at the opening chapters of Acts to see the early church in prayer.

Luke tells us that after Jesus' resurrection he appeared to his disciples over a period of forty days and spoke to them about the kingdom of God. After Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples went back to Jerusalem to wait for the fulfillment of God's promise as Jesus had told them to do. There in Jerusalem the apostles "*joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers*" (1:14). Jesus has told them to be witnesses to the ends of the earth and their first response is to pray.

A faithful church waits and prays. Our waiting implies that the things that need doing in the world are beyond our ability to accomplish just by our own effort and programs. We need some other empowerment, so we wait and pray. Our waiting and praying also remind us that the gift of God's Spirit is a gift that we keep seeking in prayer. It's a gift that's always new (William Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation Commentary*).

When our district superintendent preached here this summer, he said that the time for waiting is over. We're not in the same place the early

church was before the Holy Spirit filled them. The Holy Spirit has been and is being poured out. The Spirit is here and is on the move and active. We don't need to wait and pray for the coming of the Spirit. We may need to wait and pray to get ready to receive the Spirit ourselves. Mainly, we need to pray to receive the Holy Spirit and commit to following the Spirit's lead. Then we can pray for the Holy Spirit to show us how God is already at work and what God calls us to do in the power of the Spirit.

When the disciples and the others were all together on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came and filled them. This was the birth of the church. Peter stood up before a large crowd, preached to them about what God was doing and invited them to be part of it. Three thousand people believed and were baptized that day. Then Luke tells us that the believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and *to prayer*" (2:42).

Some time later Peter and John were going to the temple to pray at the three o'clock prayer time. They saw a crippled beggar at one of the temple gates. He asked them for some money. Peter and John looked straight at him and Peter said, "Look at us! I don't have silver or gold, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (3:4, 6). The man was instantly healed and went into the temple with the disciples—walking and leaping and praising God.

When a crowd gathered to see the man who had been healed, Peter preached to them about Jesus. Then the priests and the captain of the temple guard arrested Peter and John. Still, many who heard Peter's message that day believed and about two thousand more were added to the church. The next day the religious authorities met and questioned Peter and John. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, told them about Jesus. The authorities tried to get them to stop speaking or teaching in Jesus' name, but Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (4:19-20).

The authorities threatened the disciples, but didn't know how to punish them because all the people were praising God for the crippled man's healing.

When Peter and John were released, they went back to their people and reported what the chief priests and elders had said. When the people heard this, *they raised their voices together in prayer to God*. And rather than praying for protection from the authorities, they prayed for boldness to continue speaking the very word of God that got them in trouble. Listen to how they prayed and how God answered:

“Sovereign Lord, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: ‘Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his anointed one.’ Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. (4:23-31)

This quick survey of the first four chapters of Acts shows how important prayer was to the early church—and how important it is to us. Will Willimon comments on these events:

The community moved from its time of prayer to a time of confrontation with the misery of the world in the form of a crippled man. Then, after arousing the ire of the authorities and testifying to the world and its rulers concerning the power of Christ, the community once again withdraws for prayer, seeking to be given in worship the power it needs to witness boldly to what is happening in

the world. In this rhythm of action and speech, witness and worship, the church discovers the source of its life. (*Acts*)

If the early church is a model for the church now, we can learn a lot about prayer and ministry from the book of Acts. We see again how important prayer is. And not just individual prayer. Of course, each of us wants to be a person of prayer. But corporate prayer is vital too. We want to be a praying church, a community of faith united in prayer.

Charlie Shedd was a pastor and author. Among his many books is *The Exciting Church Where People Really Pray*. In it he describes the prayer ministry that involved all the people in his small church on Jekyll Island, GA. Speaking of the need for prayer, he said that the real tragedy of the church is not empty pews, but empty people. Most of the book describes what happens when people pray for each other. Shedd says:

- where the people pray, they care for each other
- where the people pray, lives will be changed
- where the people pray, they attract new people
- where the people pray, there will be social concern
- where the people pray, they also serve the church
- where the people pray, they reach out to the world
- where the people pray, the little negatives stay little
- where the people pray, everyone is able to serve

Everyone is able to serve because everyone can pray. When the church's most significant work is prayer, everyone can be important, whether they're able to attend church or not. Because everyone can pray.

You can pray and your prayers are important. The Lord God of the universe hears your prayers. Sometimes people talk about praying and feeling as if their prayers get no higher than the ceiling. You know what? Your prayers don't have to go higher than the ceiling! They don't even have to go that high because God is right here. He is closer to us than our own breath. He hears us.

Maybe you think you don't know how to pray. We don't have to know a lot about praying to do it. Of course, we can always grow and learn more about prayer, but God is pleased with our praying, no matter how feeble it is.

A man heard his granddaughter one night repeating the alphabet in an oddly reverent way. He asked her, "What on earth are you up to?" She explained, "I'm saying my prayers, but I can't think of exactly the right words tonight, so I'm just saying all the letters. God will put them together for me, because he knows what I'm thinking" (*Illustrations Unlimited* 424). Just offer to God your thoughts, desires, feelings, questions and thanks. He knows what you mean.

There are many ways to pray and many kinds of prayer. I've found that using written prayers helps me. *The Book of Common Prayer* and the *United Methodist Book of Worship* both have a variety of prayers that help me express what I need to say or help me get started with my own praying. **(Handout)** I also have been writing prayers myself, often based on the Scripture I read. That helps me collect my thoughts and express them. It's also interesting to go back and read those prayers later.

There are various kinds of prayer including prayers of thanksgiving, of commitment, of surrender, of tears, of authority, of celebration. One kind of prayer that all of God's people are called to is *intercession*. Intercession is simply praying on behalf of others. If we truly love people, we'll want more for them than we're able to give, and this will lead us to prayer. Intercession is a way of loving others (Foster 191). Our impulse to pray for people who are victims of violence or for their families is an expression of love. That's also why we pray for people who've been devastated by earthquakes and hurricanes. We pray for those close to us who are in trouble. And we pray not just in times of trouble, but we pray consistently for the well-being, for the salvation of people starting with those closest to us and moving out in ever-widening circles.

We may feel the need not only to pray but also to act. Through prayer, God leads us into action and guides and empowers our action.

We can intercede individually or in a group. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that there is

a point at which we hear the pulsing heart of all Christian life in unison. A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face ... is transformed into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner. This is a happy discovery for the Christian who begins to pray for others. There is no dislike, no personal tension, no estrangement that cannot be overcome by intercession as far as our side is concerned. Intercessory prayer is the purifying bath into which the individual and the fellowship must enter every day. (*Life Together* 86)

Most of us probably need to start with "baby steps" in the work of intercession. I 'm far from being as consistent and effective in this work as I'd like. Here's a little exercise we can use to get us going and tone up our prayer muscles.

When we join the United Methodist Church, we promise to participate faithfully in the church's ministries by our prayers. Here's a way to do that:

- 1) Each day pray, "God bless this church and help us be all that you wants us to be."
- 2) As you get ready to come to worship, ask God to get you ready, to prepare your heart and mind, to raise your expectations of what God will say to you and do for you in the worship service.
- 3) As you're in worship, pray for the people around you. Ask God to bless them, to meet their needs, to speak to them and touch them in some way.

If we'll all do those three things consistently, I believe we'll be amazed at what God does here. We'll be on our way to being a church of prayer.

