

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 7, 2014**

**BEING THE CHURCH (7):  
PRAYER AND COMMUNION**

**Acts 1:12-14; 2:42-47**

There is, as Solomon reminds us in Ecclesiastes 3, a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven. The season of Advent is a time to remember and a time to anticipate. At this season, we look back to recall and joyfully proclaim the first coming of our Savior into the world. We look forward to His coming again in the fullness of His glory. It is a time both to celebrate the ultimate Christmas gift we have received from God, and also to await and prepare for the promised return of Christ our King.

**HOW TO BE THE CHURCH**

Luke's description of the church in Jerusalem at the end of Acts 2 can, if we take it to heart, serve as a model for us, showing us how to be the church today as we await the coming again of Jesus, the Lord of the church. The followers of Christ in Jerusalem, as we have discussed before, were "devoted ... to the apostles'" teaching and to the fellowship" (Acts 2:42). That is, they were passionately committed to the Word of God, to the message of the gospel and the teachings of Jesus. They looked to God's Word as the final and only infallible rule for faith and life. They were also committed to one another in the fellowship of the church. Their *koinonia* or shared life together was a huge priority in the life of the church. They shared the joys and hardships of life together, and they willingly shared what they had with one another, as anyone in the church had a need. They didn't simply talk about loving one another. They put their love in action.

Until the Lord Jesus returns, like the church in Jerusalem, we are to devote ourselves to the Word of God, to the message of the gospel and "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) contained in the Old and New Testaments. And, like the church in Jerusalem, we are to love, come alongside, care for, and share with one another in the fellowship of the church. Because the church is, and is meant to be, a family where Jesus is Lord and everybody counts. It is a family in which, however imperfectly, we receive grace and extend grace. A family that sticks together. A family that doesn't give up on one another. A family that seeks God's best for each other. That is the kind of church God wants our church, and every church, to be. It makes my heart glad and moves me to give thanks and praise to God whenever I see or hear of these qualities being lived out in *our* lives. In *our* fellowship here at Faith.

But there is more to the picture Luke paints for us at the end of Acts 2. In addition to their devotion to the Word and to one another in the fellowship of the church, the followers of Christ in Jerusalem also devoted themselves "to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (2:42). Communion and prayer. Let's talk about prayer first.

## **DEVOTED TO PRAYER**

Prayer is one of the central themes of the Bible from beginning to end. It was central in the lives of such Old Testament figures as Moses, David, Elijah, and the rest of the prophets.

It was central in the life of Jesus, too. Mark 1:35 tells of an occasion on which “very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house” where He was staying in Capernaum, and “went off to a solitary place, where He prayed.” I have the sense that this was not a rare occurrence. Instead, it is an indicator of a pattern of prayer in Jesus’ life. His disciples had to have seen it. They couldn’t miss it. In Luke 11:1, it says: “One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When He finished, one of His disciples said to Him: ‘Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught His disciples.’” They would not have asked Him to teach them to pray if they had not seen how Jesus made it a priority in His life.

On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus prayed for His disciples in the upper room (John 17). He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane just before His arrest (Matthew 26:36-44). He even prayed on the cross, asking the Father to forgive those responsible for His death (Luke 23:34), which, of course, is not only the Jews or the Romans, but all of us.

We know that Jesus urged His disciples to make prayer central in their lives and to keep on praying. He told them the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8) to encourage them to keep on praying and not give up or lose heart (18:1). In the Sermon on the Mount, He urged His followers to ask and keep on asking, to seek and keep on seeking, to knock and keep on knocking at the door in prayer (Matthew 7:7-8) – in other words, to be persistent in bringing our requests and needs to God in prayer.

Prayer was also central in the life of the church in Acts. We see it in Acts 1:14, where, while waiting in Jerusalem, as Jesus instructed, for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were, as one commentator put it, “assiduous in prayer” (R. Longenecker). “Assiduous.” Do you know what it means? I had to look it up. It means constant, persistent, tireless. They were tireless in their prayers. They prayed and kept on praying. We see it in Acts 1:24, where they prayed specifically for God’s guidance in the selection of a new apostle to replace Judas. We see it in Acts 4, after Peter and John were released from jail, as the church prayed for holy boldness to continue proclaiming the message of the gospel in spite of opposition and threats (4:24-31). In Acts 6, we see the apostles praying over the men chosen to be the church’s first deacons (6:5-6). In Acts 12, we read that, after putting James the brother of John to death, Herod Agrippa proceeded to arrest Peter with the intention of executing him as well. “So,” as it says in verse 5, “Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for Him.” His brothers and sisters in Christ in Jerusalem were praying for him “most strenuously” (*MSG*). God heard their prayers for Peter. God answered their prayers for Peter and freed him from prison. The odd thing is that when Peter showed up at the house where a prayer meeting was being held, and a young woman named Rhoda, recognizing Peter’s voice, ran excitedly back into the house to tell everyone Peter was at the door, these same believers who had been praying for Peter’s deliverance did not believe God had actually answered their prayers on Peter’s behalf (12:6-17).

There is a lesson in this for us, of course. We are to pray in faith. We are to pray expectantly, expecting God to answer. If we don't expect God to do anything, what is the point of praying? If we bring our needs, requests, and petitions to Him in prayer, we must do so believing that God can and will act in response to our prayers. This doesn't mean that God will always answer our prayers the way we want. But He will give us an answer. In His time. And it should not surprise us when God does something surprising, even miraculous, in response to our prayers. You never know when God is going to do something you never thought He would, even though you have prayed for it to happen.

There are more recorded instances of prayer in Acts, including Acts 13, where the church at Antioch prayed for Barnabas and Paul, as they commissioned them and sent them off as missionaries to spread the gospel (13:1-3). Later, in Acts 14, Paul and Barnabas prayed for the elders they had chosen to lead and govern the churches they had planted on their missionary journey. There is the unforgettable scene in Acts 16, where Paul and Silas, having been arrested for causing a commotion in Philippi, were having a jailhouse prayer meeting at midnight one night, praying and singing hymns to God, when an earthquake caused all the prison doors to fly open and the prisoners' chains to come loose, prompting the jailer to ask one of the most important questions you could ever ask: "What must I do to be saved?" (16:30).

You can also see the centrality of prayer in the New Testament letters of Paul. In Romans 12:12, he urges us to "be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, (and) faithful in prayer." In Philippians 4:6, he encourages us to turn our worries into prayers. In Colossians 4:2, he calls us to "devote (our)selves to prayer." The ESV says: "Continue steadfastly in prayer," while *The Message* says: "Pray diligently." Then, in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, we have this all-encompassing mandate to "pray continually" (NIV) – "without ceasing" (ESV); "all the time" (MSG).

Prayer was central in the life of the church at Jerusalem. It occupied a central place in the New Testament church. And it is meant to be central in the life of the church, and in our lives as followers of Christ, today.

As you should know, because it is included in the bulletin announcements every week, there are regular prayer gatherings here at the church every Monday evening at 7:30 PM and every Thursday morning at 11:00 AM. Not many people come to these prayer times. In fact, you could count on one hand the number of people who come regularly to one or the other of these prayer meetings. I don't think this means we are not a praying church. I know that not everybody can attend a prayer meeting at these times. I know that for many of you, prayer is a regular, central part of your life. I know many of you take prayer very seriously, and you are devoted to prayer in your personal devotional life. Many of you pray in your small groups, or you pray with and for others in lots of different circumstances. So it would not be fair or accurate to evaluate our devotedness to prayer as a church simply on the basis of how many people come to this or that prayer meeting.

I do think that meeting as a church family to pray, and doing so on a regular basis, is a good thing. I think it can have a positive spiritual impact in our lives and relationships, in our

fellowship and life together as a church, in our witness and ministry in the community around us, and in the church's mission to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Prayer can make a difference. Prayer *does* make a difference. And there is truly never a time when it is not time to pray.

Is prayer central in your life? Are you devoted to prayer? Will you make prayer a priority, or a higher priority, in your life by setting aside ten minutes, or ten minutes more, to pray every day between now and Christmas? Will you use that time to pray for our church family, to pray for one another and our relationships in the church, and for our witness in the world? There is plenty of room for growth in my prayer life. Maybe it is true for you, too.

### **DEVOTED TO COMMUNION**

In addition to prayer, the followers of Christ in the church at Jerusalem devoted themselves to "the breaking of bread" (Acts 2:42), which could simply refer to the practice of sharing a meal with a few others, or having a pot providence dinner with the whole church family as we did last evening, with or without a scarf and tie exchange. More likely, though, what Luke means in this context by "the breaking of the bread" is the Lord's supper or communion, which commemorates Christ's once for all offering of Himself as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. The bread in communion is a symbol of Christ's body, freely given for us on the cross. The cup symbolizes the shedding of His blood for us, paying with *His* blood, with *His* life for *our* sins. Rightly understood, this sacred spiritual meal is stunning in its beauty and power to communicate how deep and wide and high and long is the love of God our Savior for us, and how truly great, how beyond amazing, is His grace.

The church in Jerusalem made it a priority to share communion together. We do the same by celebrating the sacrament together each month, usually on the first Sunday of the month. In doing so, we remember and bear witness to what Jesus did for us. By faith in Him, we receive the spiritual benefits of His once-for-all, all-sufficient sacrifice for us. We give thanks (the verb in Greek is *eucharisteo*) to God for His saving grace given to us in the suffering and death of His Son. We offer ourselves to Him as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1), which, in view of all He has done for us, is the only reasonable thing to do. And we celebrate. We celebrate the redeeming work of Christ on our behalf. We celebrate the forgiveness and freedom from the power of sin and guilt and death that Christ has won for us. We celebrate His grace – grace that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Like us. Even though there is a solemnness about it, the Lord's supper really is a celebration of all that Christ has done for us and all the benefits of His grace. So, as you take communion today and in the future, as often as you do it, let your heart celebrate. Let your face show it. Let your voice sing out in praise.

These are marks of a healthy, vital church, and of a healthy, growing Christian:

- Devoted to the message of the gospel and the whole Word of God
- Devoted to one another in the fellowship of the church
- Devoted to a lifestyle of prayer
- Devoted to the sacred meal of communion

The devotion of the church at Jerusalem to these four things spilled over into an ongoing, outgoing life of witness to people all around them who did not yet know Jesus as Savior and Lord. Verse 47 tells us what happened as a result: In His great mercy and abounding grace, “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

O Lord our Lord, let it be so among us. In our season of waiting for the second advent of our Savior, let these things be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.