

THE OPPOSITE OF BUSYNESS
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First Presbyterian Church
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Acts 1:1-14

I want to stop the reading for a moment here at the end of verse 11, and ask a question: What do you imagine happened next in this story? What did the disciples do?

Hold the picture in your mind: The risen Christ has appeared one last time before the disciples. “Before many days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit,” he tells them. “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” And then, while they are watching, Jesus ascends from the earth and disappears, a cloud obscuring their view of him. Two men are suddenly there, clothed in white robes. They ask the disciples: “Why do you stand looking up into heaven? Jesus will return to you just as you saw him go.” So the disciples returned to Jerusalem.

So the question is: What do you think the disciples did next? Here is what I could imagine. I could imagine that they rushed right out to preach sermons to proclaim the risen Lord to the people. “We’re not going to stand around looking up into heaven,” they could have said. “We’re going to get right to it.”

I could imagine that they might have had a big meeting to plan their strategy for evangelism, broken into sub-committees in charge of refreshments, publicity, renting the Memorial Building.

I could imagine that they would have built a big worship center, complete with sanctuary and fellowship hall and gymnasium, with a Starbucks in the assembly area to entice people inside.

I can imagine any of those things. But here is actually what happened: [Verses 12-14 are read.]

That’s not what I imagined. They return to Jerusalem—and they gathered together for prayer. I would have expected that, filled with the excitement of Jesus’ ascension, they would have been all fired up and gotten busy. But they didn’t do that. They gathered together, and they prayed.

It surprises us, this response, because that's not the way we are taught to respond in our day. Ours is a world where, in church and out, we are expected to do something, to be proactive, to think outside the box, to take the bull by the horns. In our world, waiting is uncool. What is cool is being busy.

And we are busy, many of us. We have claims on our time. Sometimes it is a burden. But in a strange way, we are tempted to be proud of how busy we are. We may complain about our busyness, but we also want people to know that we are busy, because busy is equal to being important. If I'm busy, then people want me. I'm in demand. I'm indispensable. I'm important.

Conversely, when age or sickness or disability make it no longer possible to be busy, we get the feeling that in the larger scheme of things we're not very important. "I can't do much anymore, so I must not be worth much." In the world, our worth is so often tied up with how busy we are.

Do you know what the disciples did? They did not worry about looking busy. Instead, they gathered together in an upper room, maybe the very upper room where they had last gathered with Jesus. And they didn't do anything, at least not in the way we measure doing. Instead, they devoted themselves to prayer.

The text goes to the trouble of listing exactly who is there. The eleven disciples—Judas Iscariot is dead, remember—are listed by name, the one's we know well: Peter and James and John, and the ones whose names we can never quite remember: Bartholomew and James and Simon. And Mary is there, the mother of Jesus. She has moved from being Jesus' mother to being his disciple, a member of the early church. This is the last mention of her in the scriptures, and here she is, gathered with the other disciples, devoted to prayer with the others.

They don't do anything, not as we measure doing. Jesus had told them to go back to Jerusalem and wait for the promise of the Father. (verse 4). Jesus had told them that the Holy Spirit would come upon them. (Verse 8) And that was enough. They trusted. They devoted themselves together to prayer.

Prayer. When you think about it, the very act of prayer is an admission of how little we can do. Our busyness will not save us. Prayer is an admission that we are not in control, that whatever we do depends finally on the presence of God.

I have to confess that often for me this is the hardest part of prayer—setting aside those thoughts of all the things I've got to do. There are appointments to keep, emails to respond to, letters to write, a sermon to get to work on. You've got your stack of things. Shouldn't we really be getting to them?

But prayer acknowledges that all we have and all we are comes from God. To think that we can do all these things in our own strength is an illusion. We depend on God, totally and completely. Prayer is an admission of that.

Sometimes, though, we even make our prayers an accomplishment, a work that we're busy at performing. They say that prayer lowers blood pressure, and it might; or that it relieves stress, and I guess it can; or that it makes us more holy, although the true prayer shows how unholy we are; or that it makes God pleased with us, even though God loves us before we pray the first prayer. All those things might be true, but that is not why we pray.

You see, if I pray for those motives, I have put myself back at the center: my blood pressure, my health, my spiritual life. But prayer by its very nature takes the focus off of me and puts it where it belong: On the God who is the giver of every perfect gift.

Karl Barth says: "We can never regard prayer as our work, as a human achievement. . . . To pray as a Christian means to renounce all illusions about ourselves, and openly to admit to ourselves our utter need."¹ That is why, says Barth, that we pray "in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord." When it comes to prayer, we don't have a leg to stand on. The very act of prayer is because of what Jesus does, not what we do.

True prayer, then, is never about me. It is about God, and it is about all of us. The disciples gathered together—Peter and James and John and all the rest, Mary—and they were devoted, one and all, to prayer. When it comes right down to it, there is really no such thing as totally private prayer. We are always in community when we pray. Even when I go into my closet and close my door, I am still a part of the communion of saints. After all, even in the most private prayer, we pray, not "My Father," but "Our Father." Even when we're alone, we are together.

Martin Luther, the 16th century reformer, certainly knew what it was to pray for others. But there were also times when he would stop and say: "I feel as if someone is praying for me."² Luther was constantly aware of the community of faith, where we sustain one another in our prayers.

About five years ago, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church authorized the establishment of a Task Force to consider the divisions in the church, and come up with some way to address these divisions and disagreements. They called it the Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. It was a group that was deliberately diverse, people who did not agree with each other on many of the issues facing the church.

You have to understand—there was a lot of interest across the church about this Task Force. There were difficult issues that needed to be addressed. People were waiting for them to come up

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.3. pp. 277, 267.

² Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer*. (New York: Association Press, 1949), p. 178.

with something. So when the Task Force met for the first time, there was great pressure to get on with it, to do something, to come up with something quick. I understand that they were at the point of having a quick prayer to get things going, and then start their discussions.

But then one of the participants, Elizabeth Achtemeier, insisted that they slow down, that before they did anything else, they would begin that first meeting, and each subsequent meeting, with a time of prayer and worship and Bible study. And they did. I bet it was hard, during that first prayer time, for participants to concentrate. “We’ve got so much to do,” some of them must have been thinking. But they carried through, and began their work.

For four years they did their work. Each time they began with prayer and worship and Bible study. Elizabeth Achtemeier herself did not live to see the end of the process. But at the end of four years they produced their report. In this congregation we have previously studied and considered its wise findings.

It would be good to report that at the end of the process they all agreed about everything and all the differences were obliterated. But that is not the case. Each continued to have differing opinions on different issues. But the members of the task force reported something else, that those differences had been overcome by the time they had spent together in prayer, worship, and Bible study. They came away as friends. They came away together, as a part of the community of Christ.

There is a time for doing and action, friends. We don’t stand around looking up into heaven. But there is also a time to stop and wait and pray. For it is from the promise of God’s Spirit that our strength comes. Remember old Isaiah’s words?

Even youths shall fall exhausted,
and the young shall faint and grow weary.
But those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength.
They shall mount up with wings like eagles.
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint.✠