

Prayer that Prepares Us
Acts 1:6-14
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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What do you do when the one you look to is gone?

It is a question that has been asked in a great variety of situations. The founding CEO of a company retires...a beloved teacher or coach moves to a different district...the matriarch or patriarch of the family dies.

What do you do? How do you go on?

These were inevitably among the questions circulating through the disciples' heads and being voiced in their conversations as they watched Jesus ascend and as they wondered what came next.

After all, he was the one who they followed. And, as illustrated in the conversation we heard in today's reading, they were still working to understand exactly what all this meant, what would take place, what they should expect.

But what they knew was that Jesus had promised to send the Holy Spirit. He had reassured them that the Spirit would guide them in his absence. He had told them to wait together in Jerusalem. He had given them each other - a community with whom to discern and to discover.

So, they went. From that place, about a half mile outside of town, they returned to Jerusalem. It is likely they went to the same upper room that had been their headquarters since their last meal together before Jesus' crucifixion.

They went...because they needed to be together. Not just those who are named as the twelve, but the women who were central to Jesus' ministry, and Jesus' family - his mother and brothers.

They went...because even though the two mysterious figures had reminded them that they couldn't stand looking toward the skies with mouths agape forever, they weren't quite sure what came next...they needed a safe space within which to regroup.

They went...because they knew they needed to pray, to listen, to discern.

Even though, ultimately they were called into the world...even though, after the Spirit comes - a story we will hear next Sunday - their ministry will reach far beyond the boundaries they have previously known...still, as Craig Jones named in Bible Study recently, they needed in this moment to “shut the world out and let God in.”

While they *were* called to do Jesus’ work in the world, that did not mean that they were to dive right in, head first, without some understanding or without a plan.

Rather, as we are also invited to do, the followers of Jesus lived in the balance of listening and speaking, being still and going out, resting in God’s presence and acting on behalf of God.

Oftentimes we don’t really pause with the end of this passage that says that they devoted themselves to prayer. Sure, we assume they prayed. We assume people of faith across generations have and continue to pray. But, often we treat this statement at the end of our reading today as background.

Instead of sitting with prayer for a while, we move from Jesus’ ascension, to the disciples taking care of the business of replacing Judas in the twelve, and straight on to Pentecost. Perhaps at best we think of this time between ascension and Pentecost as being time to regroup and time to reorganize.

But what we don’t often spend time with is that prayer was their primary activity in this in-between time. We don’t often take time out to acknowledge that it was prayer that prepared them to do the work to which they were called and prayer that prepared them to be the community they grew to be.

Because prayer shapes us, not only individually, but it shapes us as a community for living in this world and for living in the ways of God’s heart.

As Jewish theologian and rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote in 1945, “Prayer takes the mind out of the narrowness of self-interest, and enables us to see the world in the mirror of the holy. For when we betake ourselves to the extreme opposite of the ego, we can behold a situation from the aspect of God...Prayer clarifies our hopes and intentions. It helps us discover our true aspirations, the pangs we ignore, the longings we forget. It is an act of self-purification, a quarantine for the

soul. It gives us the opportunity to be honest, to say what we believe, and to stand for what we say...

Remembering again that prayer is not just a place where we are left with our own thoughts, Heschel goes on writing, "Prayer teaches us what to aspire for. So often we do not know what to cling to. Prayer implants in us the ideals we ought to cherish" (from "Prayer" by Abraham Joshua Heschel found at ["Prayer," by Abraham Joshua Heschel \(1945\) • the Open Siddur Project](#) פרויקט הסידור (הפתיח)).

Did you hear that? Prayer allows us to "see the world in the mirror of the holy," to "behold a situation from the aspect of God" (Heschel, 1945). Even as it helps us to see and hear what is already in us more clearly, it also "implants in us the ideals we ought to cherish" (Heschel, 1945).

Those early followers of Jesus had a lot of work ahead of them. The time they spent in prayer as they waited on the Holy Spirit - it wasn't just helpful, it wasn't just convenient, it wasn't just a way to pass time - it was necessary. The time they spent in prayer prepared them for the work to which they were called.

And the same is true for us.

Let's face it, as people of faith we know that we are supposed to pray. Maybe we even do pray, or at least want to pray.

For many of us prayer is as much a mystery as a reality. We often get caught up in how to pray or what to pray for. We spend energy wondering what the impact of our prayer is and what the answer to our prayer will be. We worry about whether or not our prayer is powerful enough to make a difference, and by "make a difference" we most often mean "get what we want."

But what if we found a way to sit in prayer with God and with one another?

What if we found a way to set aside our fears and questions, our worries and wonderings, and simply to be in the presence of God and the community of others who are working to follow in Jesus' ways?

What if we learned how to let prayer be a place where we open ourselves up to "see the world in the mirror of the holy," (Heschel, 1945) and where we allow God to "[implant] in us the ideals we ought to cherish" (Heschel, 1945)?

What if we worried less about what we bring to prayer and more about what we will receive when we sit in God's presence?

And what if we experienced prayer as being about more than our own requests or even our own holiness? What if we allowed prayer to prepare us for the ministry to which we are called?

Friends, there is a fragmented world out there in need of healing. And we are among those who are called to the work of bringing wholeness, of carrying hope, of shining the light of God's love. But the work is not dependent upon us and we are not left alone.

Rather, we - all of us together - are invited, even as we know we are called into the world, we are invited to sit, to pause, to listen and in doing so to be prepared to love and to serve the world. Amen.