

“Empowered to Pray”

[Acts 4:23-31](#)

One word that accurately describes the Early Church is “boldness.” On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fell upon the first disciples and followers of Jesus Christ, as he had promised, and everything changed for them.

Empowered by the Spirit, they no longer hid behind locked doors in fear. Instead, they boldly shared their faith with others. They shared their faith with the very people who just weeks before had condemned their leader to death. They shared their faith in the Temple, the very center of religious, political, and social power of their time. They talked about God’s mighty acts of salvation through Jesus Christ, and through their conviction and the power of the Holy Spirit, people accepted the message. The Book of Acts tells us that the Early Church gained several thousand new converts within the first few days of its Pentecost experience.

Of course, their witnessing and growth in number were not without cost. As expected, persecution started. The quickly-spreading new faith movement disturbed the status quo. It upset the leaders of the existing religion. Greatly disturbed by the message about Jesus, they arrested, questioned and punished the leaders and followers of his movement. Even to the point of death. We hear in Acts how Stephen became the first martyr, and how many more countless imprisonments and deaths followed. Meanwhile, the persecution continued with the growth of the Church, moving beyond the Jewish religious leaders to also include the authorities of the Roman Empire.

How? How then was the community of the first Christian believers able to sustain their faith and continue to witness boldly in the midst of growing adversity? We find an answer to this question in today’s scripture reading: they prayed together.

Yes, praying together was one of the most prominent characteristics and ministries of the Early Church. The book of Acts shows us that prayer played a vital role in the life of the first Christian faith community. Along with praise, prayer was a central element of their worship. After Jesus’ ascension, his disciples and followers continuously joined together in prayer (Acts. 1:14). It was at such a prayerful gathering that they received the Holy Spirit.

Scripture tells us that after the Pentecost experience, the believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). They prayed for wisdom as they sought to replace Judas (Acts 1:24). They prayed over their newly elected leaders. They prayed when their leaders were imprisoned. They prayed when their leaders embarked on their missionary journeys. Prayer permeated everything they did together. In the climate of persecution that lingered for many generations, the early church would not have survived without fervent prayer to God.

What image comes to your mind when you hear the word, prayer or pray? Highly likely, it is a picture of someone praying alone. Of course, prayer is a conversation between you and God. You unload what's in your heart to God and seek to hear what God might be telling you. It's quite personal.

Actually, this is an aspect of prayer that Jesus taught and showed us through his own example. Before he began his ministry, he spent 40 days in the wilderness, fasting and praying alone. Throughout his ministry, Jesus often slipped away to the wilderness or mountain and prayed alone. He did so, sometimes early in the morning, sometimes during the day, sometimes in the evening. And, sometimes, he even spent the whole night praying to God (Luke 6:12). Teaching about prayer, Jesus said, "When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father, who see what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:6).

And, we find most of our prayers to be filled with all kinds of personal requests to God. We pray for healing and health; we pray for job security and financial stability; we pray for success and happiness; we pray for patience and peace; we pray for ourselves and others; we pray for our nation and for the world.

If you ever feel like your prayers are not good enough because they sound like wish lists, do not worry. There is nothing wrong about making such specific, personal requests to God in prayer. Teaching about prayer, Jesus said, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." (Matthew 6:7) In the model prayer he gave us, Jesus instructed us even to pray for our daily bread!

I can tell you this from the experience of my parents, the stories I have heard from other believers, and my own experiences: Truly, God hears and answers our prayers, although the answers might not come in the way we want or expect. The *circumstance* you are in may not change no matter how hard you pray. But, surely, *you* will be changed through your prayers, as the Holy Spirit fills and guides your heart.

So, trusting in the goodness of God, we continue to pray, bringing our prayer requests to God, seeking God's mercy and grace, God's protection and provision, and God's strength and power for ourselves, for our loved ones, for the world. We pray with our hearts, sometimes full of joy and jubilation, and sometimes full of sadness and sorrow.

Because the testimony of the cloud of witnesses is that God will listen to our prayers and answer them. God brings strength to the weak, healing to the sick, food to the hungry, hope to the hopeless, comfort to those who are mourning, peace to those whose hearts are troubled and to the places of war and violence, justice to those whose rights are violated and whose voices are not heard.

And so our individual prayers, our one on one conversations with God, are fundamental to our faith -- to be found at the core of our spiritual practices. However, in the Book of Acts, we find that the prayers of the early church also incorporated a different aspect. As we see in today's scripture reading, there was a *corporate* aspect to the prayers of the first Christian believers.

In verse 23, it says "When they [meaning Peter and John] were released." Now to give you some context, these two disciples of Jesus had earlier seen a crippled man who was begging at the temple gate and healed

him. This miracle gave them an opportunity to tell people about Jesus. The chief priests and other elders were so greatly disturbed by what they heard, they arrested Peter and John and put them in prison.

When they were taken before the religious court for questioning, Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke about Jesus with great boldness. The priests and other religious leaders could not find any reason to punish Peter and John because the man who was healed was there along with many other people who were praising God for what had happened. So, they released Peter and John after repeatedly warning and threatening them not to teach or speak the name of Jesus again.

Though they were released this time, the threats were real and serious. In chapter 5, we find the apostles being arrested again. This time, they were beaten with rods. And, in chapter 6, we hear how Stephen, one of the deacons of the Church, was stoned to death.

Returning to the scripture passage for today, as soon as they were let go, we hear how Peter and John go back to their friends, their fellow followers of Jesus, and report all that has happened to them. Verse 24 says, upon hearing the report, the whole community of believers raised their voices together in prayer. When the early church was threatened, they prayed. And they prayed together, corporately, as a group.

And what did they pray for? Verse 29 tells us that they prayed that their leaders, the Lord's servants, would be able to speak God's word with great boldness.

Isn't it remarkable? They did not express their fear of or rage against their persecutors. They did not question God about their suffering. They did not ask God to stop the persecution before them. They did not ask God to protect them from the persecution. They did not pray that their lives would be more comfortable. They did not pray for God to remove all the obstacles to proclaiming the gospel of Jesus.

Instead, they asked only for the courage to endure them faithfully. Specifically, they made three requests to God in prayer: 1. God would consider the threats that were made against them; 2. God would enable them to speak God's word with great boldness despite the threats; and 3. God would continue to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of Jesus.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, may the example of the early Church be the light that guides us in our present day difficulties. Every day seems to bring more bad news. Whether it is locally, nationally, or globally, we live in a world where we cannot escape the reality of our brokenness. We live in a time of when our darkness is being brought to the light. We cannot escape the gun violence that has crept into our schools, taking our innocent children; we cannot escape the systemic racism of our social institutions captured on cellphone videos for all to see; we cannot escape the mental health issues that plague our society, no matter how rich or famous we are as we have tragically seen this week. Even in our Church, we cannot escape the reality that we are facing a potential split and that even if our denomination remains unified, the fact that the church we remember is dying at a rapid rate.

In the face of these realities, may we gather together, like we are today, and pray. May we lift up the concerns, the true concerns of our hearts, to God who listens to and answers our prayers. May we pray for

the boldness to speak the word of God, a message that endures forever. May we pray for the boldness to testify about our Messiah, the One who is our hope, our salvation in the face of the dark realities before us.

For the God who hears us when we are alone also hears us when we raise our voices together. In Acts, we hear how the corporate prayer of the early church was answered immediately and in a dramatic way. Verse 31 says, “After they prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.” As it was then, may it be so now. Amen.