

June 9, 2019
Acts 2:1-4, 12-18
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“Drawn by the Spirit”

Good morning! It’s been an eventful week in the McFadden family, and I know for some other families here, too. Thank you for choosing to be here at worship today in the midst of all the plans and activities of the summer season. Pentecost is always seven weeks after Easter: it was the date of Jewish harvest festival, and in our part of the world it falls in late spring, just as planting and gardening and graduations - - and in some cases birthdays -- and of course summer softball, are just getting into full swing. Pentecost is the longest season of the church year -- it goes until Advent begins in late November or early December -- and it is traditionally the time when we talk about the Church (capital C) and its mission and vision.

All of this ministry and missioning and visioning is great, but it can feel a bit overwhelming in the midst of lives and activities which are already full and maybe even over-stuffed. I want to talk about the power of the Holy Spirit this morning: the story from Acts Chapter 2 of how the Spirit came like the rush of a mighty wind, and rested like tongues of flame above the heads of the apostles, and inspired Peter to preach a message which went to the hearts of listeners from all over the known world. But before we get too caught up in the rush of wind and the drama of flames and miracle of speaking and hearing in a variety of languages, I want to walk us back a little to the still point at the center of all this energy and commotion.

Acts 2 verse 1 says “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” *They* were the disciples of Jesus, minus Judas who took his own life after betraying Jesus, Jesus’ brothers and his mother Mary, and other women who were followers. The disciples had recently cast lots and added Matthias to bring their number back to 12. So we might imagine that there were about 20

people gathered in one place. What were they doing? Does it matter? I think it does. Acts chapter 1 tells us that these folks were “constantly devoting themselves to prayer.” They were no doubt comforting and supporting one another after the emotional events of Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension into heaven, and probably trying to make sense of his last words to them as recorded by Luke, “And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city (Jerusalem) until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49) The book of Acts continues right where the gospel of Luke ends. Folks are waiting and praying, gathering every day in Jerusalem.

Here at Creekside, as we begin this season of Pentecost and considering our mission and ministry, I want to begin at the same place the first followers of Jesus did: with prayer and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If you’re a person of action, where your day is spent checking off the to-do list and figuring out how to fit it all into the time you have, prayer might not feel like a very productive enterprise. Who has time to sit still and listen for direction which we may not even hear?

From now through July 21, I am going to be preaching from the book of Acts and encouraging us to pray together: on Sunday mornings, of course, but on other mornings too. Even if it is not practical for us to be together in one place, I believe there is power in a group of people who prays together: and that power is not *our* power: it’s the power of the Holy Spirit. I have been inspired on this journey by a book which was given to me by a pastor friend. The author is Mark Batterson, who is the lead pastor of the National Community Church in Washington DC. The book is called “Draw the Circle: The 40 Day Prayer Challenge” and several of our adult Sunday School classes will be studying it along with me. There are a few extra copies in the office if you aren’t part of a Sunday School class and want a copy; you can join a class or read on your own.

In his introduction, Batterson tells about a 19th Century evangelist named Rodney “Gypsy” Smith; he was powerful preacher and it seemed like revival followed wherever he went. But it wasn’t his preaching that brought revival: as Batterson says, preaching moves the hearts of people, but prayer moves the heart of God. When asked

by other revival leaders how they could make a difference with their lives the way Gypsy had with had with his, here is what he said:

Go home. Lock yourself in your room. Kneel in the middle of the floor, and with a piece of chalk draw a circle around yourself. There, on your knees, pray fervently and brokenly that God would start a revival within that chalk circle. (p9)

That is where we are going to start, because that's where every revival, social movement and vision begins: with people who are willing to let the Spirit draw them into that circle of influence, and who are willing to let Jesus Christ be the center of that circle. This is an invitation which is open to anyone. In Acts 2, Peter is speaking to a crowd of people in Jerusalem, who come from all around the Mediterranean, and he quotes to them from the prophet Joel,

“I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit and they shall prophesy.”

What people who are used by the Spirit have in common is not their age, gender, ethnicity, language, or income level. What they have in common is a willingness to allow God's Spirit to be poured out on them. This means making God's plans our plans -- because trying to make God fit into our plans doesn't work. God is much bigger than our plans. Proverbs 16:9 says, “In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.” We are not the center of the circle: prayer is a willingness to be drawn in to God's plans and God's vision. Here's what Batterson says, “We can't create divine appointments; all we can do is keep them. We can't plan God-ordained opportunities; all we can do is seize them. We can't perform miracles; all we can do is pray for them.” We cannot answer our own prayers; that is God's job.

A verse which we will be coming back to throughout this focus on prayer is from 2 Chronicles 7:14:

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sins and heal their land.”

You’ll notice that this verse is for people, plural -- a group of people who are praying and seeking the face of God. Because of the reference from 2 Chronicles 7:14, members of Batterson’s church in Washington DC chose 7:14am as their morning prayer time. They committed to gather together to pray, or to pray from wherever they happened to be at 7:14. If you get to Day 3 in the “Draw the Circle” book, you’ll read more about places to pray at 7:14am.

So here is a modest proposal for us as a praying congregation this week: commit some time to pray every day. It doesn’t have to be at 7:14 in the morning, but it will be helpful if it’s at about the same time -- whatever that is in your schedule. The idea is to make prayer a part of your routine: a habit that you get into. You don’t have to get down on your knees -- especially if you can’t get back up again -- but it is helpful if you have a place or a posture which sets this activity aside from whatever you’re doing before or afterward. I can tell you from my own experience, good habits are not that easy to acquire: if I don’t set a goal to exercise and don’t make any plan of how and when I am going to do it, it probably isn’t going to happen. It’s the same way with prayer: for us to be available to the Spirit, we need to be intentional and accountable. I won’t try to put anybody on the spot, but I hope that especially as we are working through a prayer challenge in Sunday School classes, that it would be OK to ask “How is it going? When are you committing to pray? What’s been rewarding? What’s been difficult?” I think those are fine questions for God’s people who are called by Christ’s name to be asking one another.

And finally, for this week, don’t worry too much about the content of your prayer. You don’t have to say anything eloquent; you don’t even need to speak. If you can’t keep yourself going to God with a long to-do list, that’s OK, but remember who’s in charge: we’re not asking God for the power to do what we want; we’re asking God for power so we can do what God wants. I’m sure there are concerns in your life which will come to mind, and I hope there are joys that will bubble up,

too. We'll talk about specifics in later weeks, but it is totally OK to just rest in the moment and in the presence of the Spirit. It is also fine to pray about the same thing -- or the same few things -- over and over. Prayer isn't about how we change God, it's about allowing God to change us. Thank you for taking on this challenge.

As we prepare to leave this service of worship and go into the service of the world, I want to remind you of a few things: first, of the blessing of Mary Schmucker's birthday, and the invitation we have to be part of that celebration after Sunday School. Second, that this day marks the birthday of the church: a group of Jesus' followers who gathered each day for prayer and were drawn by the Holy Spirit into a mission which changed the world. And finally, as Christians we carry the flame of that mission: with the direction of the Bible and the guidance of the Spirit, may we be drawn to where God is calling us as a congregation. Amen.