

WHILE WE ARE WAITING

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Acts 1:1-14

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Waiting! Every day we engage in the act of waiting, not just once but numerous times. We wait for the coffee to finish dripping in the morning. We wait for red lights to turn green, for slow traffic to move faster, for phone calls to be returned, for service people to show up, for the doctor to see us, and for test results to come in. We wait to purchase tickets for a show, to be seated at a restaurant, and to check out at the grocery store. We wait for clothes to finish drying, for dinner to finish cooking, and for the rain to stop. There are those who wait for their next meal not knowing whether or not there will be one; they wait for medicine not knowing whether it will come in time to save a child; they wait for help, for relief, for hope to be realized.

Whether we like it or not, we humans spend time waiting every day. Some of that waiting may involve mindless standing and sitting, but many of us have come up with ways to help us wait – we read, do puzzles, play games, text, search the internet, watch TV, listen to music, make a phone call, and perhaps think deeply. Even though we often view waiting as a waste of time, and sometimes it is; waiting doesn't need to always be a waste of time. In fact, waiting can be a time to refocus, to acquire patience, and perhaps even to accomplish something else of importance. The act of waiting can have purpose – a fact that we are all going to try and remember that next time we are sitting in a huge traffic jam.

In the first chapter of Acts, we find Jesus' disciples participating in this common human experience of waiting. It was forty days after Jesus' resurrection and he was giving his disciples final instructions. Jesus told them about receiving power and how that power would make them into his witnesses in "Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8) Immediately after saying this, Jesus was lifted up and right out of their sight. The terminology we often use in the church is "Jesus ascended into heaven." As the initial shock of Jesus' ascension and the "two men in white robes" suddenly appearing wore off, the disciples began their half mile, "Sabbath day" walk from the Mount of Olives back into the city of Jerusalem. Jesus' directive to be his witnesses was clear, but they weren't quite sure how to do it. They were definitely not ready to follow through with it.

At the time of Jesus' Ascension, he only had about 120 followers. There were thousand more who had seen Jesus and who had heard bits and pieces of his message, but there were only 120 committed followers. And of these 120, it is very unlikely that many if any of them had ever in their lives been outside the narrow confines of Palestine. Since there were about 4 million Jews in Palestine at that time, that meant that fewer than 1 in 33,000 were Christians. Those are not very good odds, and yet, this very small group was told not only to evangelize Palestine, but to evangelize the world. It was an awful big job for so few, and I imagine they were feeling more than a little overwhelmed and fearful about the task. Such a task would require many of them to not only leave their homes, but also to leave their familiar communities and even the boundaries of their country. It would require them to confront hostile, foreign people, and it would likely be necessary for them to risk their lives. No question about it, they needed help. As they waited for the promised help of which Jesus spoke they did what God's people are always called to do, they prayed!

Those first followers didn't dash off to Jerusalem and start preaching on the street corners. They didn't immediately inquire into the purchase of property and head up a

capital funds campaign for the purpose of building a place in which to gather and worship. Instead, we see those disciples standing, sitting, kneeling and lying on a dusty, hard Jerusalem floor for 10 days, prayerfully seeking the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would help them remember and cling to their faith that Jesus is alive, victorious and sitting on the right hand of God the Father during the difficult and dangerous years ahead. The Holy Spirit would also give them power from beyond themselves, the kind of strength and wisdom that was needed if they were going to move forward with the seemingly impossible task of taking Christ's Gospel message to the world of that day.

People of faith never wait passively for God to come. We get ready by praying; prayer is how people of faith become spiritually ready for the vision and directives God gives us. There are certain directives that only God can give, because it is only by God's Spirit that we are able to accomplish them. Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus says, "Forgive those who persecute and hate you." Apart from God's help, we cannot even begin to do such things on our own. So it is with witnessing. To effectively accomplish God's directive of witnessing, God's people need God's Holy Spirit power. So while we wait for the Spirit to inspire, empower and lead us today, we also pray.

Is there anyone here today who does not believe in the power of prayer? Is there anyone here convinced that prayer makes absolutely no difference in your life and in the world? Our faith and the example set by Jesus who regularly made time to pray lifts up and teaches the importance of prayer, as well as the power that is unleashed through prayer. And yet, despite what is a general consensus of believing in prayer, does our daily life practice reflect our belief? How much time and attention do you and I give to prayer? We know our busy lives prevent us from praying the way we should, but perhaps a part of us also thinks that if we invest too much of ourselves in prayer God might expect more out of us. Since we don't want God to expect more, we keep our distance.

Clearly, there is a personal dimension to prayer as it offers us an opportunity to connect one-on-one with God. Through Jesus' own example we see that private prayer, personal prayer is important time with God. But we also see in today's passage that prayer is a community act. It's as a community that the disciples prepare themselves for the coming of the Spirit. They prayed together, because they would need to stand together as a powerful, world-transforming witness. Prayer is the stance of the community of faith as it discerns God's instructions and as it waits for the power of the Spirit to come upon it.

The real challenge for most of us is not our basic belief in the power of prayer, but whether our lives personally and as a church regularly and effectively bear witness to our belief in the power of prayer? Do we have a heartfelt commitment to prayer? Have we been "constantly devoting" ourselves to prayer as we seek the next step, and as we wait for the unleashing of God's power? As we prayerfully wait, might we dare to imagine, dare to envision what the unleashing of God's power within and through each one of us and this church community might look like?

About a year and a half ago our Church Council committed to engaging in the healthy Church Initiative process. Right from the beginning, we were told that prayer was absolutely essential to the entire Healthy Church process. Today's passage attests to the importance of a prayerful focus when waiting and preparing for the unleashing of God's power to do something new. In order for us to discern God's vision, to be open to God's leading in new directions, to learn how to tell and live out the story of faith in today's world for the purpose of making and maturing of disciples of Jesus Christ, prayer

is not simply a first step, but an essential part of every step that needs to be taken. Some of you have been praying regularly and often, and there is some evidence that those prayers are leading to something – it's not completely clear but there's something there. I am grateful and we are all blessed by the prayers of the faithful. However, I am not convinced that we are where we need to be in order to receive God's promised Holy Spirit power – the kind of power that will allow us, like those first disciples, to be faithful, bold and relevant to our context.

We know that prayer was an absolutely essential component of the church's birth, and it has been at the heart of every Christian revival of faith ever since, including the Methodist revival that swept through this country in the 17-1800's. When we talk about the Healthy Church Initiative, we are talking about the kind of prayer that will lead to revival in this Chagrin Falls church. So, are you praying regularly for the healthy church initiative prayer points listed in the bulletin since January? Did you participate in any of the monthly prayer walks when offered from October through March? Might you continue on your own prayer walks through this town or perhaps your neighborhood? Do you plan to participate in the now monthly meditative prayer services on the third Saturday of the month?

Can this church rely on your prayers as we prayerfully discern God's vision and wait for the unleashing of Holy Spirit power upon us? Will you commit to listening for God's voice and responding to the Spirit's leading of you to participate in new ministries that seek to reach new people? Will you find ways to share your personal story of God's love and salvation, and live into Jesus' directive to make disciples? Without exception, each one of us has a story about what God has done for us and how Christ is continuing to transform us. Faith is a precious, life-transforming gift that is meant to be shared.

If we as individuals and as a church are to be a part of anything spiritually significant and life-transforming, we first must pray for God's power and then we must follow the Spirit's leading. So, on this Sunday before Pentecost, this Sunday that includes the joy of five youth publicly and personally embracing the call of Christ, we remember Jesus' directive to be his witnesses. As a community of faith, let us be committed to prayer while we wait for God's power to come upon us knowing that the arrival of God's Spirit will mean the time for action has come. That time is next week's story, the story of Pentecost.

For now, pray with me... Come Holy Spirit, renew your church and empower each one of us for the task of bearing witness to Jesus Christ in Chagrin Falls, in the Cleveland area, and to the ends of the earth. Amen.