UNITED PRAYER

Acts 1:14

“All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.”

 This summer our Lincoln Park ministry has started a series of Bible studies on prayer from Luke’s Gospel. The first two weeks we studied the Lord’s Prayer, learning how to center our prayers on God himself, and also, to humbly ask God to help us with our own needs. Last Sunday Chicago UBF heard a message on prayer from 2 Chronicles 7:14 by Dr. John Kevin Lee. This weekend we’re joining our two ministries together to again study about prayer. This time it’s from Luke’s other book, Acts. In our busy lives it can be challenging to find enough time to pray personally, let alone have any time to pray with others. But as we’re going to see in this study, there’s something special about united prayer. In fact, the Bible encourages us in several places to pray not just alone but together (Mt18:19,20; Eph6:18; 1Ti2:1,2,8; Heb10:24,25; Jas5:14,15). Today, based on one verse, Acts 1:14, we want to think about the challenges of united prayer, the basis for united prayer, and the benefits and blessings of united prayer. We’re going to see that united prayer is an important part of real renewal. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

Before we get started, let’s look at the context. We all know the story. When Jesus was arrested, just as he predicted, his disciples left him all alone (Jn16:32). Peter, his top disciple, despite his self-confidence, denied Jesus three times (Jn13:37; 18:10,15–18,25–27). Not only Peter but all the disciples were ashamed and felt like failures. And because the Jewish leaders had just had Jesus crucified, they must have been imagining that they were next. So the day Jesus was risen, his disciples were all hiding behind locked doors, in fear of the Jews (Jn20:19). They were eager to get out of Jerusalem and get back to their native Galilee as soon as possible.

But after his resurrection Jesus didn’t leave them alone. The beginning of the book of Acts tells us that he presented himself to them again and again, to help them believe he was alive and give them a living hope in God’s kingdom (3; cf. 1Pe1:3,4). After a period of forty days he gave them a challenging direction. He ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit (4). He said the Holy Spirit would empower them to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (8). Then he ascended into heaven, leaving them to face the world and all his enemies without his human presence anymore (9). Though they had his words, the reality they were facing must have been overwhelming.

There was another element that made it hard for them to be together. On their final journey to Jerusalem James and John had come forward to ask Jesus to give them the top seats in his kingdom, making all the others mad (Mk10:35–41). Luke tells us that even at their last supper together a dispute arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest (Lk22:24). So, compounded with the trauma of his crucifixion and their lingering guilt and fear, they also had some pretty serious unresolved problems among themselves. Without the Lord Jesus with them, it would have been easier to just scatter.

What did they do? Verse 12 says they all returned to Jerusalem. In verse 13b we see the names of the Eleven disciples, minus Judas Iscariot. And they were all so different from each other. We may remember: Peter was outspoken, John was quiet, Philip liked to calculate, Thomas tended to doubt, Matthew had been a tax collector working for Rome, Simon the Zealot had been in a group working against Rome. All kinds of conflicts could happen among these guys. But they all went back to the upper room where they were staying.

Now that Jesus wasn’t with them anymore, why were they doing this? It wasn’t just because they left their stuff in that room, or because they couldn’t afford to go anywhere else. It was because, despite their failures and weaknesses, they held onto the command and the promise of the Lord Jesus. They overcame their feelings, their discouragement, their fear, confusion and brokenness, by believing what he said and doing what said to do. It was his words that gave them direction and strength. And it was his final words to them that became the basis of their prayer. They weren’t praying for their own problems or ambitions; they were gathered together to pray on the basis of what Jesus told them. There are times when, like them, we feel disillusioned and lost. But those are the best times for us to come back to the Bible, meditate on Jesus’ words and accept his commands and promises newly. Though it seems like there’s no way, we can find a way in his words and begin to pray again.

In verses 4 and 5 it says Jesus had “ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father…to be baptized with the Holy Spirit…” So they’re in the upper room, and what are they doing? Read verse 14. At first this may seem like no big deal, but actually it’s kind of surprising. Until now Jesus’ disciples were not known as men of prayer. When he asked them to join him in prayer at Gethsemane, they kept falling asleep. Behind his back they had a tendency to break out into arguments. But now they’re not just thinking, or talking, or competing, but devoting themselves to prayer. What’s their united prayer all about? It’s their way, collectively, of waiting on the Lord to keep his promise. Waiting on the Lord is repeated throughout the Bible. Waiting on the Lord is both an act of faith and a form of prayer. Waiting on the Lord doesn’t mean to just do nothing; it means to pray, and to pray before doing anything else.

We remember the story of David in the Bible. There were times in his life when he wasn’t sure whether he should stay or go, fight or withdraw. In such cases David didn’t calculate, or depend on his experience or abilities; he inquired of God. He asked God to show him the way. He held onto God’s promises and often just waited. Prayer was David’s way of waiting on the Lord. Struggling in life and in ministry, it’s easy to get tired or to start feeling hopeless. We want to fix things ourselves, or get started doing *something,* at least. When the prophet Isaiah meditated on who God is, he realized the outcome of waiting on God. He wrote these famous words: “He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (Isa40:29–31). Waiting on God in a time of real prayer is God’s wisdom to renew our spiritual strength.

Look at verse 14a again. In this verse we basically see a lot of people praying together. Usually we think of prayer as something very private and personal. And personal prayer is most important. But the Eleven were also praying *together*. Praying together isn’t just a duty or a good idea for mutual support; it’s an act of faith. Like these disciples, we can know each other so well and think, “I know this guy; what’s the point of praying with *him*?” Praying together requires us to stop focusing on each other’s flaws and start expressing our faith that God wants to use all of us, *together*.

There were also some other people with them. Verse 14b says, “…together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.” At first the expression “the women” seems a little mysterious. But it refers to those who had followed Jesus from Galilee: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many others. Throughout his ministry it was these women who had provided for Jesus’ needs out of their own means (Lk8:2,3). When the disciples fled, it was these women who had stayed at the cross to the end and had gone to the tomb early in the morning to anoint his body (Lk23:49,55,56; 24:1,10). So it isn’t so surprising that here they are again, in the upper room with the Eleven. In fact, the women may have been the ones who suggested they start praying together.

And there was a third group among them: Jesus’ mother Mary and his brothers. During his ministry they were not on the same page with him. Once they went out to seize him, saying, “He is out of his mind” (Mk3:21). On another occasion his brothers were telling him how they thought he should maximize his popularity; not even they believed in him (Jn7:5). But by now the Risen Jesus had appeared to his brother James (1Co15:7a). Probably on the basis of this, James got his other brothers to join the rest of the believers and start praying with them. And his mother Mary had been there while Jesus was dying on the cross, when he told her to care for his disciple John as her own son, and for John to care for her as his own mother (Jn19:26,27). It was a clear signal for her to join the community of his followers, too.

These men, these women and these family members were a diverse and unlikely bunch who probably wouldn’t be together if it wasn’t for their common faith in Jesus. But these people were all praying together. It wasn’t about who was better than whom; it was about giving each other moral and spiritual support simply by praying together, and praying for each other. Even with all their differences, flaws and faults, it was these people, just waiting on the Lord, praying together, who became the seedbed of the early Christian church.

Look at verse 14 again. There’s another phrase here that stands out: “with one accord.” Literally in Greek the word is “with one mind.” This word appears 12 times in the New Testament, and Luke uses it eleven of those times. Often it’s translated into English with a much weaker word, “together”—sometimes for good, sometimes for evil (Ac2:1,46; 4:24; 5:12; 7:57; 8:6; 12:20; 15:25; 18:12; 19:29). Paul uses this same word in Romans 15:6: “…that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Our unity can really glorify God. Just as Luke emphasizes prayer, both in his Gospel and in Acts, so he also emphasizes this kind of good spiritual unity among believers.

As we know, we human beings all have our own mind. It begins as toddlers and gets more advanced in adolescence; it continues even into old age. Once we have our own mind, we don’t want to have the same mind as others—we’d rather be our own person. Even husbands and wives can find it really hard to have “one mind,” not to mention fellowship or church members. People love to speak out and voice their own opinions. But these believers in Jesus prayed with one mind. How was that possible? It must’ve been because each person made a decision to be one with all the others. In any group setting, we can choose to be contrary, or we can choose to unite. It happens every day, in marriages, in families, at school, in sports or at work. In the case of the Eleven, since they all had lived with Jesus for the past 3.5 years, to choose to have one mind probably meant forgiving each other of their past hurts. Because they were especially helpless at this new time without Jesus, they were probably more aware of how much they needed each other, and more willing to choose to have one mind. Not only that, but Jesus gave them all one clear direction, to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit, so at least they could all agree on that.

At our recent missionaries’ conference we studied in Philippians 2. It taught us that when we’re united with Christ, we receive his encouragement, his love, his Spirit, his affection and sympathy, and then we can have the same love, “being in full accord and of one mind” (Php2:1,2). If we’re not of one mind, even prayer might not help—we might just be praying against one another—in other words, not really praying. Why do we need to be of one mind? Paul tells us in Ephesians that we Christians are all called with the same calling. What is it? Paul goes on to describe it as “…with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph4:1–3). These words may be one of the best descriptions of being of one mind. It’s our common calling, and we all need to get on board with it. Of course, sinners actually having one mind can only happen through the work of the Spirit. But it begins when we’re intentional about it, working it out by praying together. We need to keep in mind that as Christians, fundamentally we’re called to be not divisive but unifying people.

 Paul’s point in verse 14 is that they all “were devoting themselves to prayer.” The Greek word for “devoting” literally means “to associate closely and continuously with” someone, to be loyal and constantly ready, to endure, persevere and even be courageous. Being devoted is a metaphor for being steadfast and faithful, especially in prayer. Acts 2:42 tells us, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” They were really dedicated themselves to Bible study together, to fellowship together, and to prayer together. Then, verse 46 begins with the words, “And day by day, attending the temple together…” The word “attending” is again the Greek word “devoting to.” So in Acts 2:42­–46, in Greek the word “devoted” is repeated twice. In Acts 6:4 the apostles said, “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word,” emphasizing not getting distracted, making it top priority. 10:7 mentions that Cornelius had a “devout soldier… among those who attended him.” Devout is the same Greek word “devoted,” meaning this man maybe stuck very close to Paul, or maybe even that he prayed a lot. Luke 2:36,37 mentions a very old woman named Anna who, after her husband’s death, “did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day.” She’s a good example of being really devoted to prayer.

Apostle Paul taught us in Romans 12:12, “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer,” and this word “constant” is this same Greek word “devoted.” In Colossians 4:2 Paul wrote, “Continue steadfastly in prayer…” using this same Greek word, “be devoted.” And in Ephesians 6:18 he taught us, “…praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert *with all perseverance*, making supplication for all the saints” (emphasis added), and here again, the Greek is literally “with all devotion.”

Our word study of being “devoted” challenges us all to get serious about having a personal prayer life. But these believers were also *devoted* to praying *together*. Their united prayer wasn’t rare or occasional; it wasn’t forced, either. It was their top priority, really focused, really intense. Today people want things to be “chill” and like lots of personal space. It makes it hard to make an environment where people are devoted to praying together. It’s especially hard after this past year’s pandemic. It was a dark and scary time when we couldn’t be together and used technology to conveniently stay home. So to imitate these early believers’ devotion to united prayer, with one mind, we really need God’s help.

What might help us is if we pay more close attention to what our Lord Jesus told us. He said in Matthew 18:19,20, “Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” What amazing words of promise! Praying with others isn’t just a human activity of people getting together with their own ideas and agenda; it’s involves a spiritual reality of inviting the presence of Jesus among us. Hopefully we’ll hold onto his words and get more active in really praying together.

Our Lord Jesus also told us in Mark 11:24,25, “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.” He taught us that prayer is really about two main things: believing and forgiving. Believing is about our relationship with God, and forgiving is about our relationships with others. When we pray together with a believing heart, we really encourage one another. And when we pray together with a forgiving heart, we also really encourage each other. Instead of talking about each other, we should be talking to each other, and forgiving each other.

There’s one final thing our Lord Jesus himself prayed. He asked the Father in John 17:20: “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” When we are truly united in prayer, new people can actually come to believe in Jesus through us. We need to think long and hard about that. It’s not just our own efforts or activities but our unity that helps people believe.

In light of this study may God help us reflect soberly on our own unity. Are we really united, really one in Christ? Are we really praying together under our Lord Jesus, with one mind to believe and obey his words? Are we really devoted to united prayer? Even if we *want* to do great things for God, on our own we really *can’t*. We need each other. We need each other’s prayers. We though we can’t do much, what we can do is get together and pray with one accord and with full devotion and wait on the Lord together. When we do this, I believe God will really renew us spiritually and make us useful to him. May God help us.