

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Pray!

Prayer - COMMUNITY Requires It

(Acts 2:42-47)

Introduction: I like you because...

Let's start by thinking about two big, but important, words.

First, **homogeneity**. This word describes a group that is composed of parts that are similar.

You'd get that from "homo" - a word that in Greek means "*the same*." The idea behind homogeneity is that "like attracts like."

The other word is **heterogeneity**, which describes a group that is composed of parts that are dissimilar.

The Greek word "heteros" literally means "*different*." Heterogeneity operates off the principle "opposites attract."

Sociologists use these terms a lot when discussing the issue of how people connect, relationally.

Most research would indicate that the old idea of "opposites attracting" - while true for magnets - is not really true for people looking for friends.

We look for people like us. Some of us are broader than others, but on the playing field of relationships, homogeneity generally rules the day.

Think about it. Don't most of the people you hang with have things in common with you? Do they not have similar interests in sports, similar political persuasion, similar educational background, or similar ethnicity?

Friendships are very often established on the basis of homogeneity - like interests, passions, giftedness and station-in-life.

It turns out that "like attracts like" is more true than "opposites attract."

And here is where we see the uniqueness and the beauty and the power of Jesus. He cuts right through the homogeneous/heterogeneous debate and brings unity out of diversity.

Consider the first church ever, described in Acts, chapter 2.

The Church - United AND Diverse! (Acts 2:42-47)

Diversity in the Early Church (1:9-11)

The raw materials of the church were those who had gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, in the year that Jesus died and rose again.

The one hundred and twenty or so disciples had stayed in Jerusalem, awaiting the "power" Jesus had promised would come with the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

They were spending their time, significantly for our purposes this morning, **praying** (Acts 1:14).

Fifty days after Passover, Pentecost arrived, with the disciples all in one place.

Perhaps they were all in the upper room in the house where they had been praying. More likely, they were somewhere in the vicinity of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Well, the Holy Spirit was indeed poured out! Tongues looking like flames of fire rested on each of the disciples' heads. They all proclaimed the mighty deeds of God, speaking in languages they had never learned (Man, could I have used that in Russia...)!

In recording the event, Luke tells us that the crowd present was a United Nations type gathering with diversity to beat the band!

They were *[2:9] Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, [10] Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, [11] Cretans and Arabs...*

Now THAT's diversity! Even more diverse than the San Antonio Spurs roster (!), these people had come from all over the known world to celebrate Pentecost.¹

This group was the group that heard the disciples of Jesus speaking in tongues. These were the people who heard Simon Peter's Pentecost sermon. And out of this crowd was birthed the first church - an impressive church plant of three thousand.

The life of this first ever church is described for us at the end of the second chapter of Acts. And we'll notice two dynamics of this church. On the one hand, the Christians were doing some remarkable things!

Unity in the Early Church (2:43-47)

Christians were doing some remarkable things! (vv. 44-46)

A need-meeting fellowship

[44] And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; [45] and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.

¹ They had probably been there since Passover, since many Jews combined the two festivals making it one long stay in Jerusalem. Thus, many of those who heard Peter preach had been in the city when Jesus was tried, crucified and resurrected.

Most of the people who had believed in Jesus were from out of town. So, needs abounded. And the early church simply would not tolerate anyone in the church being in material need. They were meeting needs, left and right.

And they were worshipping, too. Regularly.

A worshipping fellowship

[46] Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple...

Groups of them would move in clumps to the Temple. And what would have been the purpose for going to the Temple? Worship! What else did people do at the Temple?

They may have had differences of opinion regarding politics, the economy, the state of Israel and the role of Rome. They might have had differences of opinion about child-rearing and schooling options. They might have been rivals in the business world.

They came from different countries and different cultures, so they probably had very different opinions about music, dress, food and leisure activities.

But, this incredibly **heterogeneous** group was **homogeneous** when it came to worship. They were all about Jesus. He was at the core of what they were all about - and they related to each other from that core.

So, when Christian A was ready to go to the Temple to worship, he didn't allow the politics or the economics or the demographics of Christian B to be a show-stopper. They worshipped **together**, day by day.

This church was also becoming a deeply networked church. You can tell that by another phrase from our passage.

A socially-networked fellowship

[46] Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.

In the first few weeks following Pentecost, the first Christians routinely gathered at Solomon's porch in the Temple area for worship.

And, in the in-between times, they took meals together in the informal setting of private homes, where they engaged in the same activities as at the Temple.

I'm not suggesting that there was a formal prayer meeting at every evening meeting or an inductive Bible study over every dessert.

But the same Jesus-centeredness that prevailed at the Temple prevailed in the social gatherings of the friends who made up the first church ever.

Doesn't that sound friendly?

That may seem a funny word to use when seeking to describe the relationships that existed in the first church ever.

But, after thinking for some time about how to characterize the emotional atmosphere of the church, friendliness is the word I'm going to stick with.

At various moments, the first church ever had the qualities of an **army** moving into battle together. Sometimes they looked like a **team** moving toward its goal or an office staff committed to the same project. They often looked like a **loving family** working out differences.

Here, in Acts chapter 2, the church in Jerusalem makes me think of **friends**, friends linking arms and standing shoulder to shoulder, engaged in an epic quest and having the time of their lives.

This was the communal life of the first church. The life of the church, manward. The Godward part of the church is seen at the beginning and at the end of our passage.

God was doing amazing things (vv. 43, 47b)

God's amazing work, part 1 (v. 43)

[43] Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe, and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.

Pentecost didn't happen in a closet. The tongues-speaking and the sound of the wind and the visible tongues of fire weren't secretive phenomena. Everybody in Jerusalem knew that stuff had happened.

And there would have been widespread knowledge of the on-going wonders and signs taking place at the hands of the apostles.

At various places in the book of Acts, we read of overtly supernatural events. People were healed, raised from the dead, protected against serpent bites, saved from shipwrecks - and more.

Here, in Acts 2, the Lord of the church was validating the spiritual message of the early church through physical miracles.

And credibility for the Gospel increased as the people of Jerusalem saw the accompanying signs. We might say that the signs "greased the skids" for the church to bring Jesus into conversations.

The same thing happens today, if often it is less flashy.

God works through interventions such as answered prayer, changed lives, and the miraculous when it suits His purposes!

And when His work is seen by a watching world, it opens doors for us, His people to share the good news of the Gospel!

That is exactly what happened in the first century.

God's amazing work, part 2 (v. 47b)

[47b]...and [they were] having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

A combination of the believers' winsome witness, their radical love for each other and the wonder-working power of God created a setting where the Gospel was received with open arms.²

There's a church I'll bet each of us would like to be a part of, right? Loving, worshipping, all about God's power, evangelistically effective - WOW!

And being inquisitive PLUS American, you have probably moved from the "Wow!" to the "How?" - as in "How did they pull it off?"

We're a technological people. We are drawn to think, "How?" thoughts. What technology did the early church use to create a culture where love flows and where God is central and where people regularly come to know Jesus?

Well, it turns out that the technology is spelled out for us the passage in front of us. In the cause-effect world of the first century, Acts 2:43-47 is an effect, created by the cause that is described Acts 2:42.

How Did They Do It?

[2:42] They were continually devoting themselves to the APOSTLES' TEACHING and to FELLOWSHIP, to the BREAKING of BREAD and to PRAYER.

Devoted to the Apostles' Teaching

Surely the apostles taught whatever they could remember about Jesus' teaching.

² "There is nothing to suggest that the increase in the numbers of Christians was due to more public preaching. While the possibility of such preaching must be granted, the more likely explanation for the growth of the church at this stage was the transformation observable in the three thousand. The impact of the few at Pentecost had broadened and become the impact of the many." Everett F. Harrison, Acts: The Expanding Church, Moody Press, 1975, p. 67.

They had all been present for the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), and I'll bet they keyed in on that. Jesus' parables likely got air time. They would have told about the miracles He performed, and explained Old Testament passages that had been obscure, but were now as clear as a bell in light of the crucifixion and the empty tomb.

Isaiah, chapter 53, Psalm 22, Isaiah 7:14, Micah 5:2 and many other passages were explained to the church in light of who Jesus proved to be.

The apostles probably highlighted Jesus' commands, His encouragements, His warnings of persecutions to come and His instructions about how they, His followers were to love each other.

It was through the apostles' teaching that each one of these three thousand Christians learned the way of Jesus.

Since the church was built on Jesus, one of the top priorities of the first church was to give serious attention to the teaching of those who knew Jesus - and so it is today.

Any healthy expression of the church, from that day to this, works hard to nurture a learning environment where the people of God give themselves to learning the Word of God.

In addition to continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, the members of the first church ever continually devoted themselves to "fellowship."

Committed to Fellowship

The word used to denote "fellowship" is one of the few ancient Greek words that many Christians recognize today - *koinonia*.

In the Greek culture of the first century, *koinonia* was used to describe the closest of all relationships - marriage, other family ties, intimate friends.³

³ The word can also refer to a legal partnership (Luke 5:10)

The idea is not, primarily, that we share “things” with each other. The sharing is more **basic** and **organic** than that. It is **shared life**.

In every setting, *koinonia* is dependent on the concept we considered at the beginning: *homogeneity*.

And believers through the ages have always recognized that - however different we may appear to be from each other - we Christians are homogenized at the core and to the core because of our common bond in Jesus.

In addition to fellowship and to apostolic teaching, the first church ever “broke bread” together.

Regularly Breaking Bread

Now, the consensus of Bible scholars is that this “bread-breaking” means that they observed the ordinance of taking the Lord’s Supper.

Based on what Jesus told them to do at the Last Supper, the early Christians regularly and intentionally tied remembering Jesus’ death, resurrection and coming again to shared meals.⁴

Significantly, Luke does not tell us how frequently they observed Communion, only that they were “continually” breaking bread.

We know from historical records that when the early church celebrated the Lord’s Supper, they would do so as Jesus and the disciples had observed the Last Supper, around a full meal.

This meal came to be known as The Love Feast (or *agape*). The church members would all bring food and drink to the Love Feast, enjoy fellowship around the table and end by remembering Jesus’ death with a final morsel of bread and His resurrection with a final drink of wine.⁵

⁴ I checked out seven different commentaries concerning this particular reference to “breaking bread” in preparation for giving this message. And, while consensus among commentaries is no guarantee of anything, the agreement of seven Bible scholars does carry *some* weight. Every one of these scholars believed that the reference here in verse 42 was to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

⁵ This picture is validated by reading 1 Corinthians 11.

As I think about this special service of the church, I picture an incredibly powerful bonding experience - both man-ward and God-ward.

And Acts 2:42 tells us that just as the early church **learned together** (apostles’ teaching) and **fellowshipped together** and **worshipped together** (Lord’s Supper), so they **prayed together**.

They Prayed

We don’t know what form their corporate prayer life took. But there is no doubt that these brothers and sisters in Christ spoke with their Father, **together**.

God’s people have always recognized that prayer is essential for spiritual growth and spiritual health. Old Testament Jews knew this, as have Christians.

Since the Christians who made up the first church ever were all Jews, they were all on the same page of seeing the importance of prayer.

- The members of the first church were filled with gratitude to God for their salvation. So, they prayed their thanksgivings to God!
- They were filled with joy over the blessings God had heaped on them. So, they expressed their joy to God in prayer.
- They recognized their need for God’s strength to live for Jesus. They asked prayed to God for His resources of strength and grace.

Now, did they divide into twos, threes and fours during a worship service and pray together? Did they listen as one of the apostles led in prayer? Did they all pray out loud at the same time? Did they all pray silently at the same time?

Scripture doesn’t give us any help at all in determining the form their prayers took, only that they prayed. Only that they were devoted to nurturing their fellowship through prayer.

The first church enjoyed true, rich, genuine community as it gave itself to apostolic teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer.

The church began its life at an event recorded in Acts, chapter 2. And as the chapters of Acts continue, the church marches on.

Acts is a thrilling read. In Acts we learn about the exploits of the church in narrative after narrative. The church that was birthed at Pentecost continued healthy and strong in the face of persecution and hardship. It was a minority faith in a hostile environment. Yet the heroic men and women who made up the church continued with the same spirit we have seen thus far.

And they did it by implementing the same technologies that were in place at the beginning.

I want to prove that by walking through an exercise with you. There is, in Acts, a recurring theme that pops up time after time after time after time that we dare not miss.

Consider the following snapshots of life in the early church and let's see if we can perceive a pattern...

How Did They CONTINUE To Do It?

- As the disciples waited for the arrival of the Holy Spirit, according to the promise of Jesus (Acts 1:8), they **prayed** (Acts 1:13-14)
- As they pondered how to bring back the number of apostles to an even dozen after the death of Judas Iscariot, they **prayed** (Acts 1:24-26)
- Immediately after tasting their first persecution for speaking out about Jesus, they turned to the Lord, together, in **prayer** (Acts 4:23-35)
- When the apostles were wrestling with their stewardship from the Lord and how they should invest their energies and time, they mentioned, second, the ministry of the Word and first, **prayer** (Acts 6:3-6)
- After the congregation had selected seven men to serve as “proto-Deacons” in the early church, the apostles laid their hands on them, commissioning them, but only after they had **prayed** for them! (Acts 6:3-6)

- When Simon Peter was arrested by Herod (not Herod the Great; this is another Herod, Agrippa I), the church immediately convened a special **prayer meeting** to beg God for Peter's release from prison (Acts 12:1-17)
- After the Holy Spirit had made it clear that He wanted Barnabas and Saul to go out with the Gospel to places who had never heard of Jesus, the church at Antioch **prayed** for them (Acts 13:1-3)
- When Paul and Silas found themselves in prison in Philippi for having preached the Word with miracle-working power from God, they worshipped while in prison with song and **prayer** (Acts 16:25-30)
- Before Paul left the city of Ephesus for Jerusalem, he and the church gathered at the beach for a time of **prayer** together (Acts 20:36-38)
- On this same journey, Paul stopped off at the city of Tyre, met with the Christian disciples who all warned him to not go to Jerusalem - and then **prayed** with them on the beach, just as they had done at Ephesus (Acts 21:1-6)

Do you see a pattern?

And this is to say nothing of the number of times in the epistles Paul, John and Peter either pray, encourage their readers to pray or ask for prayer!

(Check out these “for instances”:

- Prayer for givers from the receivers of money. (2 Corinthians 9:10-15)
- Prayer for the recipients of the letter. (Philippians 1:9-11)
(This pattern repeated in numerous letters.)
- Prayer from Epaphras for the Colossians' spiritual growth (Colossians 4:12)
- Prayer requested from Paul of the Thessalonians. (1 Thessalonians 5:25)
- Prayer given from Paul to the Thessalonians. (2 Thessalonians 1:11)
- Prayer urged of men in every place/church. (1 Timothy 2:18)
- Prayer of thanksgiving for Philemon and for his growth in grace. (Philemon 4-7)
- Prayer requested by the writer of Hebrews. (Hebrews 13:18)
- Prayer for the sick urged. (James 5:14-15)
- Prayer of confession to be a part of congregational life. (James 5:16)

Conclusion:

Brothers and sisters, I am not going to try and say that the fact that “prayer” was the last item mentioned in Acts 2:42 means that it is the most important ingredient in the list of four.

All I want to show from the Bible is that in any legitimate expression of biblical community, prayer will play a significant role.

It all depends on what we want. If we want good relating based on homogeneity - common interests, goals, and station of life - the necessary ingredients are already in place.

If that is what we want, then sociologists who tell us that the homogeneity principle holds true are right. And all we have to do is divide up the congregation into likes and dislikes - and enjoy!

If, however, what we hunger for is BIBLICAL community, friendships with Christ in the center, iron sharpening iron relationships, then we have to add another, more profound, SUPERNATURAL, element.

We will admit that heterogeneity is no barrier to our koinonia.

We will admit that we are homogeneous at a deeper level than a sociologist could ever imagine. Our unity goes beyond demographics, economics, politics.

And accessing that deep homogeneity with people who are desperately different in so many important, but secondary ways is by means of prayer.

We must **PRAY**.

Brothers and sisters, let us pray.