

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Constant Prayer”
Thomas G. Speers III
Easter 7—May 28, 2017

Lessons: Acts 1: 6-14; John 14:15-21

In the Mission Study that Green Hill Church completed in 2009, our Session agreed that one initiative would be to “encourage and develop personal and corporate prayer habits.” In the research that was done, there seemed to be a high interest in Spiritual Development which includes Bible Study and Prayer Groups. Every Sunday our bulletin has a page marked Green Hill Covenant of Prayer and on that page we list various people whom we are holding in prayer. Every month we have a special prayer emphasis. This past winter a group of you restarted a prayer chain and Amy Baun stepped forward to help coordinate that chain so that if you have a prayer need, simply contact Amy and she will share that prayer with those who have committed to pray. So we could honestly say that Green Hill is a praying church. Yet that doesn’t really say very much because every church should be a praying church. However in this modern era, when there are so many demands for our attention, it is very easy to let our prayer slide. If you have a project or a paper that is due tomorrow and between now and then you have to clean your room and prepare a meal and visit a sick aunt and walk the dog and check your email, so that you only really have an hour and half to get the project done, whose going to know if you put off your prayer and simply focus on the project at hand? When there are demands on our time, sometimes the easiest thing to let go is prayer. Who is going to find out?

As we enter a new season, with schools finishing up, and summer vacation coming and our own Bible Studies taking a break as well as the choir, I would like to challenge everyone of us to take on a more disciplined life of prayer and our lessons today actually offer some help in understanding how and why we might do that. Having spent forty days with the disciples after Easter, Jesus explains that it is not for us to know the times or the seasons that God has set for restoring the kingdom to Israel. God knows when the world will be made new, when the world will be made right, and we don’t. But just the same we are promised power from the Holy Spirit who will come upon us that we might be witnesses for Jesus throughout the world. And then suddenly, right in front of all the disciples, Jesus is lifted up and taken away in a cloud and the disciples are left standing there, catching flies because their mouths are so wide open.

Suddenly there are two men in white robes standing with them asking why are you standing looking up towards heaven? I think this is a hint about our prayer. Don’t spend all your time staring up towards heaven; don’t be so heavenly minded, that you are no earthly good. Yes Jesus will come back just as he has gone, but for now, bring your eyes back down to earth, down to the world around us and get on with the work that Jesus has left us to do that we might be witnesses to the ends of the earth. Look down.

So the disciples do what they were told. They go back to Jerusalem and they wait for the promise of the Spirit who will give them all they need. In our world of instant gratification, waiting is something of a burden, but if you want to be attuned to what God

is doing in the world and what God wants us to do in the world, sometimes you have to wait. When I served the church in Connecticut, we ministers worked with session to say that before we took any important action, we would spend a good bit of time in prayer. That's what the early disciples did. James Sledge describes it this way: "The disciples in the passage must have been struggling with some of my questions about what they were going to do and how they were going to do it. The risen Jesus had told them that they were going to be his witnesses throughout the world. He had promised they would be empowered by the Spirit, but none of them knew quite what that meant. And so they waited, and they prayed.

"I don't know if they used incense or centering prayer, chant or Lectio Divina. I do not know if they sat cross-legged, stood, had eyes open, or had them closed. Perhaps some did one thing and another something completely different. We don't know because the Bible seems unconcerned with the spiritual style they employed. It is clear, however, that they waited and prayed. They prayed together, and surely they prayed alone. And they continued to wait until God showed them the way."¹

That is our call: to wait until God shows us the way. Don't spend all your time looking up to heaven. Look around instead and be attentive to the needs of the world as we continually ask God's help in discerning how we should live.

As we pray, we have several promises from Christ who has not left us all on our own. First there is the promise of the Holy Spirit and we will celebrate that gift next Sunday on Pentecost. The Spirit is present in our midst. When we pray we open ourselves to that Spirit. As we wait, we have been given the gift of the church which might be the most resilient organization in all of history. Time and time again there were those who predicted the end of the Church, and time and again the church survived and even thrived. Here in this place, we celebrate God's continuing presence with us. And we also have the gift of each other. The more time I spend in this place, the more encouragement I receive from you. I can do a better job waiting and praying because I know you are waiting and praying too, right alongside me, as together we seek to be faithful to God's call for us.

Jesus said: You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. In the meantime, wait and devote yourself to prayer.

Let us pray: Gracious God, be present with us, as we carry on the work you have given us to do. Give us the strength to wait upon you. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

¹ James Sledge, A Time to Wait, © The Christian Century August 12, 2012