

BUILDING BLOCKS: PRAYER AND PRAISE

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

April 23, 2023

TEXT: Acts 2:42-47, Acts 4:2-31 and Acts 12:6-7

Good morning! It is good to be back with you. I am very grateful for the time off – and grateful to Chris Mowrer for filling in the pulpit last week. You might notice that he and Pastor Greg are gone this week. They are both attending the Men's Great Banquet in Peoria – along with Erik Galvin. We pray they will all receive a great spiritual renewal this weekend.

Probably everyone whoever has read the boxes of things like cereal or graham crackers, for example, will recognize seeing the food pyramid – showing the dietary guidelines established by the USDA. But you may not know that this guideline actually started back in 1943 – and was a wheel instead of a pyramid.

This pyramid was developed by the Red Cross and the USDA to help Americans deal with the shortage of food supplies during the war.¹ And the motto in the center of the poster read: "US need us strong – eat the basic 7 every day". And their food categories were very interesting: Group one is green and yellow vegetables. Then oranges tomatoes and grapefruit. Group three is potatoes and other vegetables and fruit. Then milk and milk products. Group 5 is meat products and then bread and grains. And get this – the final category was butter and margarine. And I love how it says at the bottom: *"In addition to the basic seven – eat any other food you want!"*

In the 1950s and 1960's – the food pyramid was reduced to the basic four of meat, fruit & vegetables, milk and bread.

It was in the 1970's that we got the distinctive black pyramid that added another category – oils, fats and desserts. And shows how much you should consume of each category. And notice how much carbs you should eat – sitting there at the bottom of the pyramid!²

Finally in 2011, the government came out with myplate³ – showing how much you should eat by looking at a dinner plate. Half of your plate should be fruit and vegetables. And the other half meat and grains.

Now the problem with all of these pyramids is that diet experts and health gurus will contradict this. Some say, "eat a lot of fruits and vegetables and very low fat and rarely eat red meat"² like the Mediterranean diet. While others say, "eat lots of meat, high fat and stay away from carbs."⁴ It is hard to know which are the right building blocks for a healthy diet.

Well, today I want to talk to you about what the right building blocks are for a healthy body in the church. The Apostle Paul describes the church as the body of Christ. The spiritual body of Christ needs some crucial building blocks to be healthy and thrive. And these are not something that have changed over the years – they have stayed true for 2,000 years. The church

we are building has its cornerstone as our faith in Jesus Christ – and is fed and nourished by the word of God.

When the church was first born, they knew what kind of healthy building blocks they needed. They are described in our theme Scriptures for this series from Acts 2:42-47, which reads:

⁴² All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper^l), and to prayer.

⁴³ A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. ⁴⁴ And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. ⁴⁵ They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. ⁴⁶ They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity - ⁴⁷ all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.

Following the example of the First church in this passage, we are going to be looking at Building blocks for a Healthy Church for the next few weeks. Our series actually began last week with our first Building Block of Discipleship – growing to be like Jesus.

Today's building block is Prayer and Praise. If there is anything that describes the early church – you can say they were worshiping and praising God and were devoted to prayer. And we can learn much from them for the spiritual health of our own church.

There are 3 specific examples we have in the book of Acts that show the early church earnestly praying – and the incredible way the Holy Spirit responds. We first see it in Acts 1 right after Jesus ascends into heaven. Jesus' last words to them were to them were to not leave Jerusalem but to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit. So, what do they do? It says for the next 10 days, *"They all met together and were constantly united in prayer along with Mary the mother of Jesus, several other women and the brothers of Jesus."* There were about 120 believers all together – praying, (v. 15) And what was the result? Ten days later on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon them all – which resulted in people from every nation being there to hear the gospel message, in their own language and the church was born!

Can you just imagine how on fire those early disciples were? And what a difference they made in the lives of people all around the world! There is great power in prayer!

Now what do you think would happen if we were united in prayer as a church family for 10 days – urgently praying for the power and filling of the Holy Spirit?

It has been said that the disciples spent 10 days in prayer, 10 minutes of preaching (with Peter) and 3000 got saved on the day of Pentecost. But how much time do we spend praying? It is hard to get people to pray even for a 24-hour prayer vigil – and how many people do we see brought to Christ? What might happen if we committed more time to God in prayer as a church?

The early church grew after that day of Pentecost. But soon, the church started to be persecuted. But that didn't seem to stop those early Christians. In fact, the church actually grew through this period of persecution through the ministry of Peter and John.

In Acts 4, we read that the church had grown to 5,000 people. The Council of Jewish leaders were beginning to get disturbed that Peter and John were preaching about the resurrection of Jesus and were doing miraculous signs like healing a crippled man. They interrogated them and recognized that they had been with Jesus. They finally let them go – but warned them to not speak to anyone in Jesus' name ever again. (v. 17) But Peter and John said, *“we cannot stop telling about everything we have seen and heard.”*

When they returned to the church and told everyone what had happened, what do you think the church did? Were they fearful, anxious, wanting to hide? Did they stop talking about Jesus? Well in Acts 4:24 we hear: *“When they heard the report, all the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God; they praised God – and remembered how God had worked, even in difficult and threatening times in the past. Then they prayed, asking God to give them great boldness in preaching the word. And what was the result? Look Acts 4:31 - “After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the word of God with boldness.”*

We live in a Post-Christian culture today that is at times hostile towards Christianity. Increasingly we hear that mentioning the name of Jesus is not allowed. Police and military chaplains can pray – but that can't pray *“In the name of Jesus”* – and teachers are not allowed to use the name of Jesus....and many other institutions restrict employees of using the name of Jesus. We are often like Peter and John, told that we are not to mention the name of Jesus. There is an openness and tolerance regarding various religions and cults – BUT – it is not politically correct to even mention the name of Jesus and we cannot say that Jesus is the only way to salvation. His name and our message of salvation in Him often shuts all doors of tolerance and often causes prejudice and even persecution.

And how are we as a church responding? I think all too often we just are silenced and feel like there is not much we can do. What if we were to gather and praise God and earnestly pray for boldness to share His message? Would we be enabled and empowered to be confident, bold disciples in this post-Christian society and stand strong for Jesus Christ? What difference might it make?

Persecution continued for the early church. We read in Acts 12:1-4, that James, the brother of John) was killed by King Agrippa – who then arrested Peter. Peter was imprisoned and under the guard of 4 squads of four soldiers each (think about that – that means there were 16 guards watching Peter!) Agrippa wanted Peter so heavily guarded that nothing could happen – there could be no way Peter could escape.

How in the world could a small band of believers ever hope to affect that impossible situation? Everything seemed so hopeless with James being killed and Peter being arrested and probably headed for execution. *“But”* – it says in verse 5 – *“But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him.”* These were no simple prayers – offered up conveniently

when the people had time to pray. It says that the church prayed fervently! They took their job to pray seriously and prayed with great emotion and determination!

When I have read this story over the years, I have always assumed that the early church was praying for a miraculous rescue for Peter. That God would intervene and set Peter free from his imprisonment. And then I read a message by a pastor Ryan Ross that said he heard about a group of pastors in Africa, who were reading this passage from Acts 12.

“One of the pastors spoke up and asked, “were they praying for Peter’s release or for him to be a faithful witness for Jesus? You Americans assume they prayed for God to stop his suffering. African Christians assume they prayed for strength to remain faithful in time of persecution.”⁵

Hm-m! Very interesting. The African’s experience of persecution themselves shaped their interpretation of this passage.

What were the people in the church really praying for? We will never know for sure – but we do know that the church believed prayer was important, And I think that they believe God would act. And I think they knew that praying was the most powerful thing they could do,

As we continue to read the rest of Acts 12, we find the miraculous rescue of Peter – of an angel leading him out of the jail, passing the first and second guard posts – and walking down the street towards the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark where the church was gathered for prayer. What follows is a very humorous scene of Peter knocking on the door. The servant girl named Rhoda was so excited to hear it was Peter, she left him knocking at the door and ran to tell everyone that Peter was there at the door. But the church finally opened the door and were amazed. There truly is a lot of power in prayer!

I personally believe that God acts when we pray. In fact, I believe if we want to see power in our church and our community, we need to pray like the early church did. The early church prayed fervently – and continually. And they faced so many obstacles and persecution - and yet the church grew! I think all too often, we see obstacles in our own lives - we see impossibilities and we think there is nothing we can do. We don’t have the resources, we don’t have the power, there is nothing that can be done. We see so many things we don’t like going on in the world – things we feel totally helpless and powerless to do anything about. But just as God did amazing things through the early church that prayed – I believe that God is still able to work through our prayers. And when we pray together as a church – we experience incredible unity. I really believe that when we focus on praying together in worship – in small groups – and praying one-on-one – we can find a unique bond through which God can do some amazing things. It gets us all plugged into God’s presence and power.

I believe that prayer changes things! It is an imperative building block for a healthy church. I believe that prayer is what strengthens the church and helps it to grow. God is still able to do amazing things through a church that fervently prays together.

I truly believe, along with the Apostle Paul, that God is able to do far more than we can ever ask for or even imagine by means of the power of Christ working in us. What would happen if we really started to believe that God will act – that God will answer our prayers – that God could bring revival and renewal to our church and our community? Could it be that we could experience a great movement of the Holy Spirit? Do YOU believe it could happen?

I am going to ask the deacons to come now and pass out to you a copy of a prayer challenge for our church. I found a resource online that was a free download of targeted prayers for the church by a woman named Sarah Higley. It is a resource to pray for 31 days for the church. I have taken this resource and adapted it to fit our congregation. And I am challenging us TOGETHER to make a commitment to pray for the next 31 days for our church. These 31 days lead up to our Commitment Sunday, going along with our Stewardship Campaign. We need to pray for everyone in the church – and for the mission and vision of the church.

For those of you on Facebook, I am going to try and post a copy of this prayer list online, after worship today. I encourage you all to join us in praying for the church.

INVITATION

Dwight L. Moody, a great preacher and evangelist of the early 20th century, said: *“Every great movement can be traced to one kneeling figure.”*⁶

Every great movement can be traced to one kneeling figure. Could that kneeling figure, be you? Could it be that God is calling you to be that figure – that person who prays earnestly for revival in the church and this community?

Christ is waiting – He is waiting for you to turn to Him and give Him your heart. He wants to use you as His servant. Won’t you come and confess your faith in Christ? Won’t you come and rededicate your life to Christ? Come and make a commitment now at this time as we stand and sing. Jesus is waiting - come now and answer His call.

RESOURCES

¹Disabled World. *“Old and New Food Pyramids and Information.”*
<https://www.disabled-world.com/fitness/food-pyramid.php>

²Lisa Jahns, et al. *“The History and Future of Dietary Guidance in America.”*
[https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5916427/#:~:text=By%20the%201960s%2C%20the%20number,breads%20and%20cereal%20\(12\).](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5916427/#:~:text=By%20the%201960s%2C%20the%20number,breads%20and%20cereal%20(12).)

³Healthline, “A Beginners Guide to a Keto Diet”
<https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/ketogenic-diet-101>

⁴Healthline, *“Mediterranean Diet 101”*.
<https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/mediterranean-diet-meal-plan>

⁵Ross, Ryan. *“Believing, Expecting, Knocking”*.
www.rbcpc.org/media/sermons/believing-expecting-knocking/

⁶Quotes from D. L. Moody. <https://prayforrevival.wordpress.com/category/d-l-moody/>