

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Sunday After Ascension, June 1, 2014

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 482, 221:1-2, 217, 219, 224:1

Lessons: Ezekiel 36:25-27, Revelation 22:12-21, John 17:1-26.

Sermon Text: Acts 1:8-14.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

There comes a time in everyone's life when he or she must get to work doing his or her life's work. This may come after moving out of your parents' home and you now have to rely on yourself to provide for yourself. This may come after a graduation, or some other milestone in life.

Most people just cannot be or remain in a sheltered situation forever, where you are doing nothing and others are taking care of you.

Today we talk about the beginning of Jesus' followers being about their Father's business, that is, their heavenly Father's business. Jesus himself was fully aware of his responsibilities when, at the age of 12, he was found in the temple in Jerusalem and told his parents "*that I must be about my Father's business.*" (Luke 2:49 King James Version)

Today we find lessons and examples for us in

FOLLOWING JESUS' INSTRUCTIONS AND BEING ABOUT JESUS' BUSINESS

- 1. His disciples didn't sit around and do nothing.**
- 2. They prayed and worshiped God.**
- 3. They went out and told others about Jesus.**

Last week we celebrated Jesus' ascension into heaven. Now Jesus is no longer physically with his followers, his apostles and other disciples on earth. They must be about their work, which is the work God has called them to.

Jesus had told them "*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*"

He left earth in a most spectacular way and it was as if his disciples were awestruck or dumbstruck when he left. They didn't know what to make of it. So they just stood there looking up into the sky after he ascended and a cloud took him out of their sight.

Then two angels appeared and talked to them. "*Men of Galilee, they said, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.*"

Let's talk about what Jesus' disciples did after the ascension and before the special gifts of the Holy Ghost came upon them on Pentecost. They didn't know when the gifts Jesus had promised would come to them. But they didn't just stand around and wait. In the book of Acts we read that they walked back to Jerusalem, and they returned to the upstairs room where they were staying. And they prayed. And they worshiped God.

Notice how precisely Luke describes the geographical location of Jesus' ascension for his non-Jewish readers. This was on the Mount of Olives, half-way between Bethany and Jerusalem.

When they went back to Jerusalem, which is about ½ to ¾ of a mile from Jerusalem, they were joining in prayer. This distance was supposed to be the distance Jews could walk on the Sabbath day without violating the Sabbath command against working on the Sabbath. However, it is used here just as a measurement of

distance. Since the ascension of Jesus took place on a Thursday 40 days after Easter, not on a Sabbath day, they were certainly not breaking any Sabbath laws. Then, they ***“all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.”***

Prayer was an essential, daily, regular part of their lives. And we really don't think that their prayers were brief 'let's get it over with' prayers. They had the example from Jesus – surely more than once – of thorough, comprehensive prayers, thanking God for everything, and asking God for everything they needed. They also had Jesus' example in the upper room on the same night in which he was betrayed, as found in John chapters 13, and 14, and 15, and 16, and especially in chapter 17, as you heard in our Gospel lesson. First they prayed: ***“They all joined together constantly in prayer.”*** Because of the way Luke records these words, it is hard to imagine that these were silent prayers. They prayed together because they were united in what they believed. We are not told exactly what they prayed for, but we can be sure that they prayed for the kinds of things the Lord's Prayer teaches us to pray for. Remember, the Lord's Prayer contains six petitions for spiritual gifts and only one for earthly gifts. Sometimes it seems that our lives are just the opposite, not only when we pray, but in all aspects of our daily lives, too. We gather to worship together only one day a week – for only an hour or so! – and use the other six days for earning a living and, sadly, often only for ourselves rather than for God's glory.

You learned from your catechism instruction that prayer is an act of worship in which we speak to God from our hearts. You learned that a believer may pray using his own words and words that are given to him by another person, as well as the words of the short prayer which Jesus gave us as a model, which we call “the Lord's Prayer”.

They certainly would have prayed privately, individually, but especially they prayed together. Here in Acts we read that they prayed in a place where believers were gathered, ***“upstairs [in] the room where they were staying.”*** But they also prayed at the temple, in a public place.

Luke has an interesting way of talking about their praying at the end of his Gospel: ***“Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.”*** (Luke 24:52-53)

This is all that Luke says in his Gospel about what Jesus' disciples did after he ascended into heaven. The book of Acts, also written by Luke, is where we find more details. Jesus was done with personally, face-to-face, preparing his disciples for that day when they would no longer have his visible presence to rely on. Then, although Jesus was gone from their sight, their hearts were filled with the great joy of knowing him to be God's servant come to rescue the world from sin and death. They were prepared to give their lives as his witnesses.

Luke writes by inspiration that they stayed at the temple – a place of worship – continually, praising God. No doubt their words of praise included singing as well as talking. And so too, our gatherings for worship are filled with singing and music as well as hearing God's Word and praying.

His disciples were not to go immediately into all the world to proclaim the Gospel. At Jerusalem they were to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit. This would be the great miracle of the outpouring of the Spirit. So they went to their usual meeting-place, possibly in the house of one of the disciples.

And we read that the disciples also held public gatherings in the Temple. In that location, they could also give witness to others, and in that way they could do what we call mission work. Because any God-pleasing prayer must be a prayer “in Jesus' name” they surely would have been able to witness to what great things Jesus Christ, the long-promised Messiah, had done. Looking ahead, we remember that on Pentecost it was through the preaching of the Word from God about the work of Jesus that many were brought to faith in the only Savior for all mankind.

But for mutual encouragement and comfort they met privately, most likely at the homes of members of their group, which we could certainly call ‘the congregation’. The names of the chief men and of some of the women of this congregation are recorded here. Peter is named first, then James and John, the sons of Zebedee are named. Then comes Andrew, the brother of Peter; Philip, also of Bethsaida; Thomas, surnamed Didymus; Bartholomew, also known as Nathanael; Matthew, formerly the tax collector, also known as Levi; James, the son of Alphaeus; Simon the Zealot, of Cana; and finally Judas, the brother of James.

Some have argued that Scripture is not consistent because of different names for some of these men. It was not unusual for a man to be known by more than one name. That usually happens today only when nicknames are used. It was a mixed group of ordinary men with ordinary names. But the Lord would accomplish extraordinary things through them.

All of these men had been preserved by God throughout the capture and horrible sufferings and death of Jesus. But they all were now ready to begin their appointed work, waiting only for the promised power from on high, which came to them in the sending of the Holy Spirit.

The eleven apostles spent the time between Ascension and Pentecost in the best possible way. They were engaged continually in prayer, and all with the same mind. Surely their prayers were both general and specific, for we know from other passages in the New Testament that they deeply felt their weakness, their sins, and their spiritual poverty, and they were anxious to receive the gift of the Spirit as promised by Jesus.

Their action is to be commended as an example for believers of all time, to join both publicly and privately in earnest prayer for the gift of the Holy Ghost, without whose power and enlightenment we can do nothing. In this kind of prayer the apostles were not alone.

There were no doubt also with them some of the faithful women, likely those who had ministered to the Lord even in Galilee, and later had made the journey to Jerusalem to be present under the cross, witness the burial, and receive the message of the risen Lord. One woman is mentioned by name, Mary, the mother of Christ. She had not returned to Nazareth, since John was faithfully carrying out the request of the crucified Jesus to consider Mary his mother.

Mary was undoubtedly regarded with great respect by the apostles, but there is no indication of the idolatrous homage which was later paid to her in various churches.

This verse contains the only reference to Jesus' mother outside the Gospels. We may have some questions about Jesus' "**brothers**" as mentioned here. The Greek word for "**brothers**" could include "sisters." When we think about who Jesus' brothers might have been, we are reminded that Jesus, speaking from the cross, committed Mary to the care of the Apostle John. We also recall that the brothers mentioned previously in John's Gospel did not believe in him. Were they brought to faith after the resurrection? Were they Mary's stepsons, children of Joseph by an earlier marriage? Were they children born to Mary and Joseph after the birth of Jesus? Were they cousins, since the Greek word for "**brothers**" was sometimes used for other relatives? The Bible does not give us definite answers to these questions, and so we cannot answer them in a definite way. Neither the questions nor the answers have a bearing on the facts of our salvation. "The "**brothers**" may even be among the believers who are mentioned in the verse after our text, where we read "***In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty)***" (Acts 1:15) That is where the apostles talked about someone to replace Judas Iscariot, the disciple who had totally fallen away from Jesus, betrayed him to the Romans, and finally committed suicide in unbelief.

So in this relatively short time – it turned out to be only ten days – waiting for the gifts of the Holy Spirit to come – they prayed and witnessed and encouraged one another also in times of worship. They didn't know when God would send his special gifts to them, but they didn't have long to wait. He came just ten days after Jesus' resurrection, on the day called Pentecost.

So today we could ask 'What are you waiting for?' Shouldn't you be about your work, which is really your heavenly Father's work, your calling as a follower of Jesus? Jesus told all of his disciples, and that includes you, and he did it more than once, to share the Gospel: "***Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.***" (Mark 16:15) And he also told you to "***go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always.***" (Matthew 28:19-20) May God be with us, leading us to continually pray and witness for Jesus! Amen.