

Acts 1:6 So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?"

7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority;

8 but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

9 And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.

10 And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them.

11 They also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away.

13 When they had entered *the city*, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James *the son* of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas *the son* of James.

14 These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with *the women*, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

NAU John 17:1 Jesus spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You,

2 even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life.

3 "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

4 "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do.

5 "Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.

6 "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word.

7 "Now they have come to know that everything You have given Me is from You;

8 for the words which You gave Me I have given to them; and they received *them* and truly understood that I came forth from You, and they believed that You sent Me.

9 "I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours;

10 and all things that are Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine; and I have been glorified in them.

11 "I am no longer in the world; and *yet* they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, *the name* which You have given Me, that they may be one even as *We are*.

Sermon: Leturgia

Loving Creator shine as a light before me that you may be seen and not I. Give me words that I may speak, give us ears that we may hear and through your Holy Spirit help us understand.

Amen.

In today's reading from the book of Acts we have one very unusual story. Jesus, who had been raised from the dead was with the disciples and as they stood there Jesus disappeared into a cloud.

While they stood there watching the sky, they were greeted by two figures in white. Jesus has been taken to heaven, they were told. This is the story of the ascension, Jesus ascended to heaven leaving the disciples standing there dumbfounded.

And what did they do then?

It says, "These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer", they worshiped God and prayed.

We all know the story of Noah. He and his family were saved from the flood by staying in the ark. When they finally came out of the ark, the first thing Noah did was to build an altar and to worship God.

When Abram was visited by God and told he would be the father of a nation what did he do? , he built an altar and worshiped God.

Jacob and Moses did the same, they sanctified places to worship God, to sacrifice to God, to serve God after they had witnessed the power of God.

When we become witnesses to God's power, what do we do?

Last week the confirmation class went to St John the Divine for Night Watch. I want to say a little about this is a wonderful program.

We arrive around 6 at the cathedral. After some free time and registration the leaders for Night watch gather all of the 100 young people and their adult counterparts for a time of gathering.

After getting some introductions and rules we begin to worship God. This we do by singing. With a printed list of songs we begin to sing. *We are marching in the light of God. You are Holy*, and other songs are sung. This gathering allows people to get warmed up, to learn some new songs as we praise God.

Music may be one of the oldest forms of prayer and worship. This was around long before Jesus or Moses or Noah, music stirs something within, and it allows a kind of sacred space to be created. In that space we come close to God.

We worship with music each week. Some of our hymns are clearly prayers directed to God.

“O, Jesus, I have promised to serve you till the end.”

“Take my life and let it be, consecrated lord to thee.”

Some are affirmations of faith.

“Earnestly tenderly Jesus is calling, calling o sinner come home.”

Music is one of the ways we pray and worship God.

Paul says: but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.

Do any of you sing to worship God when you are not here in church?
Maybe you sing in the shower or in the car.

My favorite time to do that is when I'm in the car. I have lots of music that I sing with. I love Gospel music from Kirk Franklin, Bob Marley and the Wailers, music from the Weston Priory, U-2, and lots of others. We actually began the first meeting of confirmation listening to Vertigo by U-2. Your love is teaching me how to kneel.

Some music is clearly meant to be religious, like U-2, or Gregorian chant, and sometimes I hear the words of a song and decide the words are a prayer, whether they were intended to be religious or not.

Music is one way to worship. Actually all the arts can be a way to pray: painting or drawing, or dancing or reading or performing theater can all open us to the Holy Spirit.

After gathering for singing, we went into the cathedral itself and tried a new kind of prayer for most of the group. It is actually a very old way to pray. We walked the labyrinth.

A labyrinth looks like a maze, but it is not. The design is a single path that leads to the center of a circle. At Notre Dame cathedral in Paris a labyrinth is part of the floor created with the paving stones in the floor.

During the middle ages one way to show devotion to God was to go on a pilgrimage, a journey, usually to the Holy Land. Since this was not possible for most people the Labyrinth became a way to make a sacred journey without leaving town.

The journey to the center and back out again gives the pilgrim a chance to reflect, to contemplate and to pray. Walking the labyrinth is, for many, a profound kind of prayer as it centers and focuses the walker.

The first time I saw a labyrinth was at the annual meetings for the New Hampshire Conference. A group brought a canvas labyrinth and it was available for people during the weekend and it was a favorite place to get grounded in the spirit after all the business of the plenary sessions.

I put a copy of a labyrinth in the fellowship hall, the one we walked on was much bigger.

Walking as a way of praying is not just for labyrinth walking, any focused journey can become a kind of devotion and prayer.

At St John's, as we entered the Labyrinth, we were given a shell to hold as a symbol of our prayer and at the center was a basket for us to release our prayer at the end.

Someone said to me that as they entered, they had a prayer in mind, but when they reached the center the prayer had grown and changed during the journey.

This was another way to pray, to allow a journey to open us to new possibilities.

A little later, at just about midnight we were given a candle and sent off to pray in silence.

Silent reflection has long been part of Christian prayer. Jesus was known to go off to quiet places to pray.

Silence is different than other forms of prayer where we are asking God for something, or praising God, silent prayer is a time to simply be with God.

I heard it said that a relationship between two people reaches a new plateau when they can simply sit quietly together.

I find that in my marriage, Jodi and I have reached a point where we simply wish to be near each other, no words are necessary, simply being is enough. I think she likes that since I can talk her ear off if I get going.

Just allowing God a place in our heart is enough, and, when God can enter, we can be transformed.

I can still remember my first encounter with this kind of prayer. It was a youth group retreat and we were in the Poconos. On Sunday before our worship service we were sent out for an hour and told not to talk to anyone. I was a bit intimidated with the idea of being silent for an hour- I was just as much of a chatterbox then as I am now.

As I began walking around I found that the quiet entered me, and I tried to open myself to God. It was during that hour that I had my first clear sense of God's presence, of God speaking directly to my heart.

Silence is its own kind of prayer.

So, in the darkened cathedral, a hundred or so people with candles sat for a short time in silence. We sat until music called us to the altar for a formal worship service.

In a circle we gathered for Eucharist, the great thanksgiving, Holy Communion.

This was worship with songs and prayers and responses. It was a worship service with the bread and the cup. It was what we often think of as church, gathering together to worship as a community.

That service was not unlike our worship here today. It was worship with a liturgy. This is where we get today's Greek word *leiturgia*. We think of liturgy as a formal prayer of set prayers. For us here today our bulletin shows our liturgy. A liturgy is an order of worship, but *leiturgia* suggests something deeper.

Paul says, "Rejoice always; **pray** without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

Pray without ceasing.

Prayer is about relationship, and our relationship with God does not stop when the postlude ends on Sunday morning only to begin again the following Sunday with the prelude. This hour or so we spend here in church is not all we need. We are called to pray without ceasing.

This is where we may find a challenge. How do we pray without ceasing?

That is difficult; I think it takes lots of practice. I am still working at that myself, how do we pray continually with all that goes on in life?

One of the things I have found in my visits to monastic communities is their regular times of prayer.

Benedictines pray throughout the day. They begin when they awake, they continue with a kind of Bible reflection called *lectio divina* or sacred reading.

There are prayers following lunch, before supper and just before bed. Having regular times for prayer during the day can help us to stay focused on God.

For a while, when I had a functional watch, I set the alarms for 10 am and 4 pm to remind me to stop and pray.

We can find lots of ways to remember God throughout the day. We can pray at meal times, at bed time, and in this way we can approach Paul's call to pray without ceasing.

It is all about being intentional, about wanting to pray and then doing our best to stay mindful to the presence of God.

When I spoke of community, I said that it is possible to find God all the time, and because God is everywhere all the time, that is true. We can find God walking beside a lake or the ocean, we can find God while we are working on the Habitat house, we can find God as we spend time with loved ones.

We can even find God while we are working, cleaning the house, grocery shopping, riding in the car or even waiting in line. God is always with us; it is our attention that wavers, not God's.

It is also part of our way to come together as a community to worship God as one.

This community is where we can share the blessings of our ceaseless prayers with our church family. Prayer in community helps ground all our other prayers.

Think of the times you have family celebrations, if some member of the family is missing, it is not the same. The same happens here in the church.

I am sure each of you could think of some member of this community who is not here today. Community makes a difference in our prayer life.

In today's reading from John Jesus is in prayer. He knew his time had come and he worried about those he would leave behind.

"I am no longer in the world; and *yet* they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, *the name* which You have given Me, that they may be one even as *We are*."

We are called to be one, we are gathered in Jesus name as one body. Even when we are apart we are joined by our prayers.

Why, why should we be joined in prayer like this? What moves us to pray?

We pray because we feel the need, because we see that we are not able to understand everything in this life, so we seek God's help to see us through.

The result of believing, is seeing what we believe, and when we see God at work in our lives, we begin to understand God better. When I see God at work, then I am moved to pray more.

Over the years I have heard some dramatic stories of answered prayers. How about the story of a woman diagnosed with cancer. It was an inoperable cancer and she probably had a few months to live, if she was lucky. She was not willing to accept that and looked to prayer. She prayed, her family prayed, her friends prayed, her church prayed and so did others. A prayer circle was formed to strengthen these prayers.

After about five months, not only was she still alive, but she was able to get out and even go to church. Not every day is sunshine and roses, but every day is a gift for her.

This is a story from this community right now.

We may not have the kind of answers that Noah had or Moses, or others figures from history, but we can see the answers to prayer. When that happens when you have an answer to your prayers, what do you do? Do you want to pray more? Do you feel closer to God? Does it make you want to say thank you and perhaps give back to God?

The word leiturgia can be translated as sacrifice. Moses built an altar to make sacrifice to God. An altar is a place to offer something to God.

We are about to gather at our altar to worship God. What are we offering to God?

This is where we come to offer ourselves as a living prayer as we become one body in Jesus.

We did not have the opportunity to see what the disciples saw; we were not witnesses to the miracles Jesus performed while he was on earth; we do not get to see him carried to heaven in a cloud.

We do have the stories of scriptures and we have our our own experiences of the presence of God, our own stories of answered prayers.

This is why we sing with abandon to God, this is why we come to God when we have needs beyond our ability, this is why we walk the path of pilgrimage, this is why we sit in silence, and this is why we gather in one body as we worship here together. We gather as community to share our understanding of the presence of God.

In Acts it says Jesus' followers were all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer.

May it be so here as well as we gather round the altar.

Thanks be to God.
AMEN.

