What are the benefits of prayer? In last week’s sermon, I mentioned some of those benefits, saying that prayer is not only about getting what we ask but what happens to us and through us when we pray. I said prayer brings us closer to God, helps us experience God’s presence, and affirms our faith by nurturing our minds, hearts, and spirits.

But besides prayer nurturing us individually, prayer also builds community. You may already have heard of what many describe as a “revival” or “awakening” at Asbury University in Kentucky. It has been on the news. (I know that place well and have friends from my doctorate studies there.) What has been reported is that on February 8th, after a regular chapel worship service, a couple of dozen students stayed after the service to continue praying. By nighttime, more and more students had joined them, and now people are traveling hundreds of miles to participate in what is happening there. In essence, the prayer service of February 8th has not stopped yet, and many young people are getting on with it.

Many people have said different things about it—positive, negative, and neutral. But, regardless of the opinions, there is something special about what is happening there. I appreciate that Asbury’s awakening is building community across the country and the world through the prayers and worship of young people. What I see there and have experienced myself is that prayer increases faith and makes people come alive with hope. That is why this is so special.

But it is not new. It may be a rare sight for many because we are not accustomed to seeing it, but prayer has been the bedrock of building a diverse and inclusive Christian community since the beginning. Consider how the presence and power of God marked the early church because they prayed together. As it says in Acts 2: 42-43, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and signs were being performed.”

Today, I want us to explore how prayer builds community and what that does to us. For this, a story in chapter 12 of The Book of Acts illustrates this beautifully. This is Acts 12: 8-17,

“As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. On recognizing Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, “You are out of your mind!” But she insisted that it was so. They said, “It is his angel.” Meanwhile Peter continued knocking, and when they opened the gate they saw him and were amazed. He motioned to them with his hand to be silent and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he added, “Tell this to James and to the brothers and sisters.” Then he left and went to another place.”

In this text, we hear that Peter had just escaped jail and returned to his friends and fellow disciples of Jesus. King Herod had arrested him for political reasons and intended to kill him, but God delivered him miraculously.

Here is some context to this story. Because of the success of Peter’s preaching, many people believed in Jesus, including many Jews. This infuriated the same religious leaders and many others who plotted against Jesus to kill him. And now they were going after the apostles and the disciples to get them arrested and even killed. Just as they sought the favor of king Herod to accomplish this, they used the same tactic against Peter and others.

Acts 12: 1-5 explains this,

“About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (This was during the Festival of Unleavened Bread.) When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover. While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.”

King Herod was going after the apostles, killing them to gain favor with the Jews. However, after he apprehended and imprisoned Peter, the church banded together to pray for him. They prayed intensely, earnestly, and without ceasing, “While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.” Because of that, Peter was released that night by an angel. God sent this angel to wake him up, remove his chains, and open the prison cell door. Peter thought he was dreaming but followed the angel’s instructions as he walked right past the guards, through the iron gate, and out onto the streets before it dawned on him what was happening.

This brings us back to our first reading, “As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary… where many had gathered and were praying.”

What is happening here is a beautiful expression of what prayer does in us and through us. It says that when Peter was free, he went to where everyone was gathered. He went to his family of faith. And, when he arrived, Rhoda, the maid girl, became so excited to see him that she forgot to open the door! What was she thinking? Why didn’t she simply open the door and let Peter in? Because the joy of seeing Peter overtook her. She was overwhelmed when she heard Peter’s voice outside the door. I love the phrase, “she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced” to the others that Peter was there, forgetting to let him in.

This was a wonderful experience of joy and craziness, so much so that when Rhoda told the others about Peter, they replied, “You are out of your mind!” “Can’t be him; it must be an angel!” But Peter continued knocking. I am sure he was in a hurry to get out of the streets after he broke out of jail. He was technically a fugitive of the law (as unjust as it was). So, when they finally saw him with their own eyes, everyone believed and was amazed.

Can you imagine the celebration that night at Mary’s house when they experienced God’s answer to their prayers? It was a party—a time of amazement and gratitude.

My friends, praying is such a blessing, but that blessing is multiplied when we share it with other believers—as is happening in Asbury, for example. But this is not new to New World. Over the years, this church has prayed and seen God answering those prayers in amazing ways.

**Suzanne Smith Testimony**

When things get rough, when we have problems or trials, or things aren’t going our way, who should we turn to? The example we see in our scripture today, the stories we hear from Asbury University, and the testimony of Suzanne show us that when we join with others in one Spirit through our many prayers, amazing things happen.

Jesus told his followers, “My house will be called a house of prayer” (Matthew 21:13). What better support system could we have than a group of committed believers coming together in unity to lift the needs of individuals, the church, the community, and the nation?

Let’s continue to grow as a church that prays fervently for one another, giving encouragement and support!