As I was thinking about this week’s sermon, a thought came to me. If we at Graceview planned a special weekend workshop on prayer and brought in a trained facilitator to lead the workshop, I wonder how many of us would sign up to come. Even more frightening, I wondered if I would sign up to come to the workshop. Some subjects reach out and grab our interest. We would say to ourselves, “That could be really interesting. I would like to be a part of that!” But prayer? Well, not so much.

What is it about prayer that just doesn’t grab our attention or imagination? I expect that there are a number of reasons as to why most of us are not all that interested in prayer. The first is that we have all tried prayer but found in many cases that it didn’t really work for us. It may have been that there was something that we were really concerned about or wrestling with, and we prayed about it, but nothing happened, so we just kind of gave up. A second reason is that we may have tried to make prayer a consistent part of our lives, but found it was such a struggle that we finally tired of it and it slowly petered out. Finally, we may have come to the conclusion that prayer just isn’t practical. We lead busy lives and if we are given a choice between doing something practical and prayer, we would just naturally rather be doing something hands on.

As a church, we demonstrate how we feel about prayer by how much it makes up the focus of our church. Let’s start at the top and work our way down. First, we have a Session that is made up of all the elders. The Session provides spiritual leadership to our congregation. There are 17 members of Session and I am the Moderator. We open our meetings with prayer and we close our meetings with prayer, but how much time do we devote to prayer during the meetings when we are faced with different issues? Now I believe that we have a wonderful group of elders. I am impressed by our elders and I can’t think of a group of men and women that I would rather work with, but prayer doesn’t come very high on our agenda. Now I am not going to go through all the other groups or areas of church life, but when I soberly think about it, I can see that when we cover all the other bases in terms of music ministry, property management, Christian Education, community outreach and ministry to the sick and shut-ins, we don’t have a prayer ministry except for a small handful of people who gather on Sunday morning to pray mostly for the sick.

The Scripture lesson I chose for this morning focuses on an incident that occurred late in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus and his disciples have travelled from Jericho, which is 18 miles from Jerusalem and they arrived late in the day. This is not a pilgrimage. Jesus is not a pilgrim who is seeing the temple for the first time and needs to take in all the sights. Jesus first came to the Temple to be dedicated as a baby and then yearly to attend the
feasts. We know that he was there when he was about 12. The question we may ask is, “Why is Jesus coming to the Temple at this particular time?” Well, probably Malachi 3:1 explains it best. “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.” Who was the messenger who was to prepare the way? Well, we know that was John the Baptist. Who was he preparing the way for? Jesus, the Messiah. Suddenly, Jesus the Son of God will come to his Temple. So it is as Lord of the Temple that Jesus comes this time. He comes to inspect it to see if it is being used as God intended. So that first evening, after arriving in the city, Jesus went and looked at everything, but then he left the city and went to stay the night in Bethany.

The next day, 15 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts ... I don’t want to go into too much detail on the context here, because I don’t want to detract from our central subject, but it is essential that you have some background. The temple was a place where pilgrims came to make sacrifices, and to do so there were items that they needed that they couldn’t bring from home. There needed to be money changers because it was necessary for Greek and Roman coinage that pilgrims would normally carry to be changed into the standard Temple currency. At the very least they had to have the right medium of exchange to pay the temple tax. There needed to be places where people could buy doves and whatever else they needed to participate in the temple sacrifices. Originally, all this commerce would have taken place out on the Mount of Olives where there were four markets. Here pilgrims could buy all the ritually pure objects they needed for participating in the sacrifices. However, during Jesus’ time, possibly even during the time of Jesus ministry, a change had been made. The four markets on the Mount of Olives were operated by the Sanhedrin. There was nothing in this arrangement for the High Priest, so he set up a market in the temple courts that was in direct competition with these other markets. It did not create very harmonious relations, but it satisfied the avarice of the High Priest. This was the situation that Jesus walked into that day when he entered the Temple Courts. 15 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, 16 and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. Jesus did not disrupt the temple worship or the functioning of the sanctuary. No, his actions only
impacted what went on in the outer courts. The two things that he did specifically were first of all to overturn the tables of the moneychangers and the benches of those who were selling doves. He did one final thing. He would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. Realizing that his actions alone were not sufficient to pass on the very important message he wanted to convey, Jesus then proceeded to teach the people. Quoting from Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11, he taught them, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.’ ”

This is a very important statement, particularly because of our focus this morning. ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’. This statement does not just apply to the temple. I believe that it applies to all our places of worship. Personally, it begs the question, what does God expect for our churches? No, it does not mean that we are just interested in prayer. I am sure that a survey would show that almost all Christians and even most non-Christians believe in prayer. It means more than that we occasionally pray in church, or that we have a number of prayer ministries. Being a house of prayer means that a church’s primary identification and work is prayer. I would say that if this is the benchmark, then we have failed miserably.

Why have we failed so in this area which is so important? One reason is that prayer is hard work. It is not an easy task. And I include myself in this. I have no trouble praying with people or praying in a group, both of which are areas that others find hard. What is difficult for me is praying by myself. During these times I struggle to keep focused on prayer. My mind is all over the map and I find myself thinking about everything except what I want to focus on in prayer.

However, there is another reason many of us have trouble with prayer. It is because we can’t see the point of prayer. If God is Sovereign and all knowing and all powerful, then what is the need for prayer? He already knows what our needs are. Even before a thought enters our heads or a word is on our lips, is he not already aware of what it is? So why bother? It makes no sense. Why tell him about something he already knows?
The fact of the matter is that in one sense God doesn't need us. There is nothing he can't do apart from us. Yet at the same time, he has chosen to nothing without us. His plan is that he has chosen to work in cooperation with us. Jesus invites us to be his partners and to work together with him. How are we going to respond?

I have heard of our involvement with God referred to as a dance of cooperation. Being one of those people who never learned how to dance, I don't really understand what it is all about when two people dance. I would think that it would require both coordination and cooperation. If someone were to try and teach me how to dance, and I think that would be a formidable task, then the only way it would be possible is if I were willing to cooperate. I would have to be willing to follow my partner’s lead, because I certainly would not know what I was doing. Prayer is a dance of cooperation whereby we submit and follow the lead of our divine partner. And strange as it may seem, God, who could do everything without us, has chosen to do nothing unless we are willing participants.

When we look at the life of Jesus, we find that prayer played a huge part in his relationship with his Father. It was not unusual for Jesus to leave early in the morning to spend time with his Father in prayer. In Mark 1:35 we read, Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. This was not unusual. This was the norm. Jesus, who we automatically assume had a close relationship with his Father, made it his practice to cultivate that relationship. In John’s gospel, we find whole chapters that are devoted to prayer to the Father. If Jesus, who needed it the least, made it part of his practice, then shouldn’t we make it part of our practice?

Prayer is all about spending time with God. If we want to know about God – better yet, if we want to know God, then we must spend time with him. It is in prayer, along with our study of the Scriptures, that God makes himself and his will known to us. He calls us to be faithful in prayer (Romans 12:12) and to pray continually (1Thessalonians 5:17). What is interesting to me is that prayer is the one resource that is available to every church no matter the size of its membership, its location or its financial resources. When churches, pastors, church
leaders, intercessors and members pray, things happen: relationships with God deepen, Christian community grows and people come into a saving relationship with Jesus. Here is a quote from W. Stanley Mooneyham, shown here with Dr. Billy Graham:

“Let us stop complaining that we do not have enough people, enough money, enough tools. That is simply not true. There is no shortage of anything we need – except vision, prayer and will. Prayer is the one resource immediately available to each of us.”

One of the reasons that prayer doesn’t appeal to us is that we are always looking for instantaneous results. We are looking for something that produces results in the short term and prayer is one of those long term strategies. We want to see results in only a few days, while solutions through prayer may take weeks, months, years and maybe even decades. The result is impatience, frustration and discouragement.

Jesus said, “My house shall be a house of prayer.” We have tried to build everything but. Jesus never said, “My house shall be a house of preaching” or a “house of music” or even “a house of worship”. Yet, we have tried to make it into all those things. Seldom, if ever, do we mention the dynamic of prayer. Jesus also said in Matthew 16:18, And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. However, as we look around, it seems that the gates of hell are everywhere prevailing against the church. This is the language of warfare. It is a call to arms – to take up and use the weapons God has given to us. Our purpose as a church is not to be a have an impact on political life; to build impressive facilities, and even to provide a context in which fellowship can take place. Repeatedly, we are called to be active in spiritual battle. Here our primary weapon is prayer.

Dr. Brad Long put it this way:

“Jesus addressed his words about the gates of hell, not to individual Christians, but to the church. He wants Christians to pray as a church. He wants to form us into an army, divided into cohorts who are learning to pray in one accord. The effective army is the army that learns to communicate well, to trust its leaders, to reconnaissance regularly – in short to function in one accord. The evil one, Luther noted, does everything he can to prevent this from happening, because he wants to keep his gates intact.” (Prayer that Shapes the Future, p. 191)

In closing, is it possible to sum up what it means to be a “house of prayer”? A house of prayer is a church where:

- Prayer is understood as the primary work.
- Prayer is the most identifiable ministry; and
- Prayer is at the heart of every facet of the church’s ministry and mission.
In a church which is a house of prayer;
- The pastor is committed to prayer and passionate about prayer.
- The leaders are people of prayer and lead by prayer. They pray for members of the congregation and they pray before, during and after making decisions.
- Members of the congregation are serious about prayer in their private and corporate lives. The ministry of prayer is designed for all the members of the church.

It is the cry of my heart that Graceview would truly become a house of prayer in every sense. May prayer become the source and core of our lives together.

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January 19, 2012  
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Benediction

Go now as a light to the nations.  
Honour the Lord;  
preach what you know of the risen Christ,  
and fulfil all righteousness.  
And may God strengthen you and bless you with peace;  
May Christ Jesus bring forth justice for you and among you;  
And may the Holy Spirit alight on you  
and affirm you as God's beloved ones.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.