

“The Call to Prayer”
March 20, 2022

Philippians 4:4-9

As Lent approached, I came across the hymn by Percy Dearmer that has informed our Lenten reflections and worship as well as my preaching in these days, “Now Quit Your Care.” We sang it again this morning—it is a powerful hymn that holds up.

I was struck by the final words of the first verse: “Reply with love to love most high,” because they suggest that Lent—and all of life, really—is about our response to God’s love.

The opening words of the hymn present both the challenge and the call to faith that will inform our response: “Now quit your care and anxious fear and worry, for schemes are vain and fretting bring no gain.” They echo the sentiment of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount that we heard a week ago: “Don’t worry about tomorrow for today’s trouble is sufficient for the day.”

The call to quit our care seemed pastoral and appropriate enough as I considered it back in January. The Omicron surge was peaking and would soon begin its downward trend. We’d had a lot of anxious fear and worry for two years. It seemed that we needed to put at least some of that aside, give up anxious fear and worry for Lent, as it were.

Of course, before Ash Wednesday even arrived, Russia had invaded Ukraine and we had an entirely new but once again global threat to deal with—along with the pandemic that, really, has not gone away—as recent reports of the increase in the Omicron BA2 variant make clear.

Quit your care?

Easy for Percy Dearmer to say, I guess. Born in London, educated at Oxford, serving as an Anglican priest at a church where the famous Martin Shaw was the organist, working with the renowned composer Ralph Vaughn Williams. What cares?

Well, Dearmer quit, not so much his cares, but his position in his London church to become a chaplain to the Red Cross in Serbia during World War I. It was there that his wife died from typhus. He lived through the Influenza Pandemic of one hundred years ago with all of its death and uncertainty. He was a Christian Socialist and when he later became a canon at Westminster Abbey, he used his status and position to aid the unemployed in the area.

Like our congregation, Dearmer valued both beautiful worship and social justice.

Like the members of our congregation—and any congregation—he lived through difficult times and knew sorrow and care.

Writing this hymn for Lent, Dearmer showed us again that those who know grief and anguish, fear and worry, are also those who can honestly tell us “quit your care,” reminding us that “schemes are vain and fretting brings no gain.”

So, it is good to sing those words and to listen carefully to them in these days.

You know, however, that Lent is about more than “quitting” or giving something up. These days invite us to take up new ways of life—or to strengthen those life-giving practices in which we are already engaged. Our hymn reminds us: “Lent calls to prayer, to trust and dedication.” If we quit our care, it is so that we can take up such a calling.

So let us listen carefully to the ancient voice of Paul as he speaks to us this morning.

Paul had a wonderfully close relationship to the church in Philippi—it shows in every line of this letter that Paul wrote from prison as he awaited trial on a capital charge. Listen carefully as Paul urges: “Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

I’ve kept coming back to those words over the last two years. They trouble me and they encourage me.

“Do not worry about anything...” This is how some speaks when they are in prison and awaiting trial? They are either the words of someone who has no grasp of the danger in which he lives or they are the words of someone who has looked all of life squarely in the eye and affirms that all of life is held in the providential care of God.

Instead of worrying about *anything*, Paul suggests that in *everything*, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, we let our requests be made known to God.

Prayer suffused with thanksgiving recognizes God as the giver of all good things. Such prayer grows from an affirmation that all of life is lived in the presence of a loving Creator. To pray in this manner is to recognize that there is a power in the universe that is immeasurably superior to ourselves. To pray is to confess that there is a limit to our ability—to know, to understand, to act, to love. To pray is to confess that God is greater.

Dale Matthews is a physician who is convinced of the healing power of prayer. He tells of a conversation with one patient in which she said, “My upbringing trained me to grin and bear it, no matter how hard things were, so I thought that’s what God wanted me to do, too—to just be a good girl and keep a stiff upper lip. It turns out all along I could have been saying, ‘Okay God, you know I need your help with this!’”¹

“Let your requests be made known.” Paul invites us to pray for all manner of needs—health, wisdom, good relationships, well-being, common sense. Anything and everything are worth praying about.

Do you remember Martin Luther’s extensive list to explain the meaning of “bread” in the Lord’s Prayer? It included food, drink, clothes, shoes, houses, farms, fields, land, money, property, a good marriage, good children, honest public servants, a just government,

favorable weather, health, honors, good friends and loyal neighbors. Since Luther, others have agreed that we can think of “our daily bread” in the widest sense of the term. Certainly, we could quickly expand this list to include other necessities for our lives in these days. All of our needs can be—and should be—the subjects of our prayers.

Like the rest of you, I’m still learning about prayer—about what it means for me and for us and for the world and for God when we “let our requests be made known to God.” The physicist and Anglican priest, John Polkinghorne, suggested that prayer creates a “laser-like coherence between divine and human wills. Laser light,” he says, “is powerful because it is what the physicists call coherent. All the waves are in step, so that all the crests coincide and add up, and all the troughs coincide and add down, yielding maximum effect.”²

When we pray, then, we are not seeking to substitute God’s action for our own. Rather we are making a commitment to will and to work with God. When we pray for the homeless and the hungry in Iowa City, we are also saying that we will work toward their well-being. When we pray for those who are ill, we commit ourselves to be a part of their healing in whatever we are able and to look for that healing in whatever way it might be made manifest. When we pray for peace in Ukraine, we commit ourselves to doing those things that make for peace, to give in a way that is in some sense, well, *sacrificial*, to be those who welcome refugees.

Yes, even as we think this way, questions start to arise:

Why should God answer my prayer and not the prayer of someone else?

Why do some—all—of my prayers go unanswered?

And this is where the words of Paul have become more clear and more helpful as I’ve listened closely to them in recent days.

Note that Paul does not say: “Make your requests known to God and you will get what you ask.”

He does not say: “Make your requests be made known to God and all will go well.”

He does not say: “Make your requests be made known to God and life will be as you think you want it to be.”

God’s generosity is not limited to the shape of our perceived needs.

God’s care is not constrained by our limited sense of compassion.

God is able to do more than we can ask or imagine.

Paul tells us simply—and profoundly—that as we make our requests known to God through prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

The peace of God standing watch over our hearts and minds—this is what comes to us first of all as we pray: a great peace—deep strength and courage—in the midst of all the care and anxious fear and worry that we feel.

In this peace we find the strength to move forward when we might choose to stop.

In this peace we find the hope needed when we would succumb to despair.

In this peace we find the courage to confront the powers that threaten and seek to destroy.

Because of this, Paul is able to tell the Philippians—and us—to “rejoice,” that is, to take heart. If all is well, that’s great. But those who are struggling, those who look out at a world in pain—that is, most of us—can also “rejoice.” We can have courage because God is indeed near and no circumstances can separate us from God’s empowering peace.

Lent calls to prayer, to trust and dedication.

These days and our world call to prayer, to trust and dedication.

We are guarded by God’s peace—and so even now we can pray.

¹ Dale Matthews, *The Faith Factor*, pg. 204..

² Polkinghorne, op.cit., pg. 92-93.