

IT ALL BEGINS WITH PRAYER

Philippians 4:1-9

October 12, 2008

(PROPER 23/YR A)

Don't worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

There was a man -- probably one of my relatives, come to think of it - - who said if he ever went to church they'd have to *carry* him in. And that was just about the truth of it, mind you. Really it was. *Both* times he went, he had to have help. The first time was on his wedding day. And he was not able to climb the steps or open the door, even, because he was terrified. Worst case of cold feet you've ever seen. And when the organist started playing *O Promise Me*, he nearly fainted. So they practically had to carry him up to the altar...

That was his *first* experience of Church. And he didn't care to repeat it. So he found other things to tend to on Sunday mornings. 'Cause every time he even passed by the building or heard the church bells ringing out in the distance, his knees would buckle and his stomach would quiver.

But he did (*finally*) go back. It was years later. When he passed on. They carried him in, sang a hymn or two, and the preacher gave the sermon. And they carried him out... [Not all that different from the first time he was there.] And a few days later, his poor widow sat in an attorney's office. And he said, "Ma'am, your husband doesn't seem to have left a will. Can you tell me what his last words happened to be?"

And she hung her head as if she were embarrassed by all of this. And she said, "I'd rather not say." And the lawyer said, "I know this is a

difficult time for you. But it would be so helpful, ma'am, if you could just share that with us."

And she said it again, "I'd just rather not say. It was kind of personal," she said. "Just between the two of us, you know." And the lawyer said, "Oh, I understand completely. Believe me, I do. But it would just make things so much easier for us if you could tell us his last words. And she shook her head and sighed. "Well, if you have to know," she said, "his last words to me were, **You couldn't hit the broadside of a barn with that old gun.**"

If someone had asked the good folks at the Mt. Pisgah United Methodist Church what had been said at Prayer meeting the night before the local beer garden burned down, I think they might have said, "We'd rather not say..." Not that there was a *smoking gun* to be found. There wasn't. But there *were* about a dozen mild-mannered Methodists, mostly seventy years of age and over, who looked *awfully* guilty...

Because they didn't care for that place. Not one bit! It was okay, I guess, when they sold gasoline there ... and Twinkies. But somewhere along the way, they took the gasoline and the Twinkies and the soda pop off the menu and put *alcohol* in its place. And instead of selling Milky Way bars [like they used to] they put in a pool table and a bar. And they hauled in a juke box that played Hank Junior and Merle Haggard and writers of hymns that we did not sing at Mt. Pisgah. ✘ And they drew a crowd. That was part of the problem, I think. They had a bigger crowd than *we* did. And they sang louder, too! And they held their Sunday evening service the same time we held ours. And generally stayed later -- even later than the Baptists! (Isn't it amazing that people will sit on barstools and bleachers and old theater seats for hours on end, but make such a fuss if they have to sit in a church pew for more than an hour!?)

That's why they didn't care for that place up at Mt. Pisgah. So they decided to do something about it. These sweet old, mild-mannered Methodists did something to rescue their poor neighbors from that awful place... They prayed. They prayed that God would shut that place down. That he would make them go away. 'Cause it wasn't setting a good example for the children. And it just wasn't right. They didn't have to explain it. He knew that already.

And sometime between that Tuesday evening and the next Sunday morning, Charlie Brown's Beer Palace burned to the ground. Ann and I were almost afraid to get the newspaper out of the box the next morning for fear of what we might see there. **EIGHTY-FOUR YEAR OLD CHURCH LADY ADMITS TO ARSON. CLAIMS SHE WAS INSPIRED BY PASTOR TO BE AN ACOLYTE FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS.** (You think I'm kidding?) "Dear Lord, I prayed. I'm not saying it was you. But if it was you, couldn't you have been a little more subtle? I'm only twenty-five and I don't even *know* any lawyers." It was quite an experience for a young preacher, believe me. ✠

It happened again at another church. And this time it *was* in the newspaper. A nightclub opened in a small town somewhere. And the churches there organized an all-night prayer vigil. This is true. And they prayed that God would destroy that club with the flames of his righteousness. And that very evening, the nightclub was struck by lightning, and before the volunteer firefighters could get there, it was gone. Burned to the ground.

And this is almost unbelievable, but it's true. The owner of the nightclub sued the churches that organized the prayer vigil. And the churches, of course, denied responsibility... So after hearing both sides, the judge said, "It seems that wherever the guilt may lie, one thing is clear. The nightclub owner believes in prayer... but the church doesn't."



Don't worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

It's hard not to worry isn't it? I used to worry a lot. A lot more than I do now, I think. Because it runs in my family. My mother, who is an accomplished worrier herself, passed it on to me at birth. It was part of the package -- along with the blue eyes and dimples and this terribly premature gray hair that we have. The worry gene was in there with all the rest of them, I think. And it was one of the first things I did. Before I walked or talked, I worried. I used to worry about being left alone. And when it was dark, I worried about what might be lurking out there in the shadows -- bears and lions and mummies and ghosts, or a criminal escaped from the Wayne County jail. And I worried about what other people would think of me -- even if they were strangers I'd never see again for the rest of my life. And that was just the beginning -- long before the price of gasoline and global warming and lower back pain even entered the picture.

And it just wore me out. Because worrying is hard work. It takes an awful lot time and energy. And after awhile it takes a toll on you, doesn't it? It just drains you. Leaves you exhausted and sometimes even sick and unable to function. People take to their beds with worry. Sometimes even their deathbeds, I think, because it just saps the life and the health right out of a person.

But it doesn't just happen to people, mind you. It can happen to churches. The very same thing. That's why Paul sent this letter to the Philippian Church when he was in jail for preaching the gospel. Because their life and their health as the living body of Christ in that place was in danger. They were drained and weak. Their energy was gone. And it was getting harder and harder for them to function as the church.

Because they were troubled and anxious about so many things. People outside who were working against them. People like those who arrested Paul. People who wanted to put an end to all this Jesus business once and for all.

And inside the church people were divided -- squabbling and arguing and siding against each other over the least little things, I'm sure. The color of the floors, maybe. Or whether to sing the old psalms of David or the more contemporary, Gentile-friendly stuff people were writing. And communion, the Lord's Supper. Who'd bake the bread? Should it be unleavened or leavened? Wheat or rye? Flat or round? Worrying about such things can take a lot of time and energy. Time and energy that might be better spent on other matters.

And there were a couple of women there in the church that were pretty much making life miserable for themselves and everyone else in the church. And whatever the problem was with these two it was taking a toll on the whole church there at Philippi. So much so that Paul mentions them by name in the letter. [A letter that was to be read in church, mind you. On a Sunday morning when everyone's there!] Help them work it out, says Paul. Help them get it together. They mean so much to the church. They've done good work for the Lord. So help them. Pray for them. Don't give up on them.

And don't worry, he said. About anything. It doesn't help. It drains you. It weakens you. It distracts you from God. So don't worry about these things, but instead pray about them. Pray about everything. If there are problems there, let God in on it. He can handle it. Really. Pray for each other. Pray for people out there. Pray that they'll get the message God wants you to give them. Pray that they'll come to know Jesus just as you have. And pray that the Church and the Kingdom will grow and that God's will and not your own or anyone else's will be what matters to you. And pray, don't worry. Because this is God we're talking about. So what

if you think you don't have the strength to do what he calls you to do. So what if you don't have the resources. So what if everyone tells you it can't be done. God is here. This is God's church. And with God all things are possible and nothing is ever impossible. So don't waste your time and energy worrying. But do the opposite. Turn to the One you can trust. The One who can come through. The One who has all that we need to be the Church and the people he calls us to be. Turn to God. Pray. Put it all in his hands. And know that you can trust him always. Every time. No matter what. And let the peace of Christ well up inside you and in the church.

It's Paul's answer to everything -- pray. Not because the words are magic. They aren't. That's not what prayer is. It's just talking to God. It's being with God. It's a relationship, really. Talking and listening to someone who loves you. Someone close and personal and deeply intimate who created you just for this -- that you would be connected to him.

And when we do that, says Paul, an amazing thing happens. The peace of God, a peace beyond all we can even imagine, guards and protects our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. That doesn't mean bad things won't happen. But it means that even in the hard times -- even in our struggles -- we are not left on our own. But God is there. We can rely on his strength. We can trust in his love and grace. And knowing and trusting and believing in God who loves more than we can imagine brings peace. As Paul said to the church at Philippi, the God of Peace will be with you.

So ... **Don't worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.**

Let me tell you a little story -- a parable, really [that David Byrd shared with us last Saturday morning]. There was once a town at the foot of a beautiful mountain range. A lovely place. Like something you might

see in a picture or a painting. And high up in the hills, a strange and quiet forest dweller took it upon himself to be the Keeper of the Springs. He patrolled the hills and wherever he found a spring, he cleaned its brown pool of silt and fallen leaves, and mud and mold. And he took away the twigs and anything else that had fallen into it, so that the water that bubbled up through the sand ran down clean and cold and pure.

And as the water trickled and flowed down the mountainside it was joined by other streams from other springs until it was swollen into a river of life for the busy little town. Millwheels were turned by the river. And gardens were refreshed by its waters. Fountains tossed it like glittering diamonds into the air. Swans sailed along on its surface and children laughed and played on the riverbank.

But the town Council was a group of hard-headed business men. And they pored over the town's budget and found there a line that said "For the Keeper of the Springs." And someone said, "What is this? Why should we pay it? I've never even seen a keeper of the springs. Besides," he said, "If we build a reservoir just above the town, we won't need a keeper of the whatever anymore. And we'll save money."

So they crossed it out. Just like that. Did away with the keeper of the springs and built themselves a reservoir. And so the keeper of the springs stopped tending the springs and cleaning away the debris. And he sat on the top of the hill and watched them build the new reservoir.

When it was finished, it soon filled with water. But the water didn't -- well, it wasn't the same. It didn't taste as good. And it wasn't quite as clean or clear as the water from the springs. And a greenish sort of film formed on its surface. And it became stagnant and foul. And there were constant troubles with gears that turned the wheels in the mill. They'd get clogged with slime. And the swans flew away to some other place. And then people started getting sick. Really sick. All over town.

So the town council called a special meeting. And it was sad, I think, because they had to swallow their pride and admit that they'd made a terrible mistake by getting rid of the Keeper of the Springs. He was a hermit living up in the hills. So they sought him out and begged him to do the work that he had done before. And he was happy to do it and started making his rounds right away. And it wasn't long until the millwheels were turning again. And the water sparkled in the fountains. And the geese were swimming along on the river. And the sickness went away and people were healthy again. And the children were laughing and playing along the banks of the river.

And the town decided to do something special to honor the keeper of the springs, but no one even knew his name. So they went to the town hall and looked through the old records until they found it. And there it was. The name. The name of the Keeper of the Springs was Prayer.

Prayer is what clears away the clutter in hearts and lives. Spending time with God -- simply being with God in prayer brings life to us and to the church. It clears away all that distracts us. It brings health and energy. It brings new life and new hope and enables us to be the people, the Church God longs for us to be.

That's why I want to ask you to do something this morning. I think -- no, I believe that God wants First Church to be a house of prayer. God wants us to be a church that depends on him. A church filled with his love and his Spirit. A church that is healthy and whole. A church that reaches out with his love to touch the hearts of others and bring them home where they belong.

I believe God wants us to be Keepers of the Spring for this community, for this city. And we do that with prayer. So let me ask you to do that. Make this church a house of prayer. Come and pray here. It's okay to do that. You can come to the chapel. You can come to the sanctuary. You

can come alone or with someone else. You can come in groups and pray together.

And when we are here in this place for whatever reason, let's pray. Let's take time to turn to God. To trust God. To ask God to help us with whatever problem or whatever task might be at hand. Because this is God's church. And he has plans for it, I think. He wants to use us in a wonderful way to bring healing and hope and life to others. And it all begins with prayer. For God is God. And God alone has the energy and strength, God alone has all the resources we need to be the church he is calling us to be.

So **Don't worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
Benen, OblSB