

“A Praying Congregation: Renewing Your Spirit”
Philippians 4:4-9

Have you ever been told that you need to drink more water? In the last twenty years or so, there has been a growing awareness that drinking a good amount of water is important to our health. Yet, most people don't drink enough water each day. A creative person came up with a solution for this problem. I recently listened to an interview with the CEO and co-founder of Liquid Death (image on screen). He came up with the idea of using images and ideas of other popular drinks but for something healthy and that does not use plastic. He named it liquid death and used so many outrageous ways to market this, such as “Death to Plastic,” “Murder Your Thirst,” or “Don't be scared, it is just water.” Here is a video about this creative way to market water: <https://youtu.be/iXjhNZIqexs>.

I found this to be a powerful way to promote something that is healthy and good for us by changing our perspective on water. Water is often presented as bland and not fun to drink, but this company is trying to change that. I believe that this is the kind of shift we need to make about prayer. Most people of faith know that prayer is good for them, but they struggle to make it a priority. We also think that prayer can't be fun or joyful. I remember as a child, we had a group of evangelical missionaries come to Syria and my friend from the Baptist church invited me to their revival. One of the things they invited us to do was to get up every morning and pray for at least an hour starting at 5 am. I was about 8 years old. So I tried to do that which only lasted a week before I was too exhausted and felt a lot of guilt for not doing my praying right.

In her book, *A Praying Congregation*, Jane Vennard tells of a time she felt envious of someone else's prayer practices. She writes, “Every day he ran for 45 minutes. After his shower, he spent half an hour in Bible reading and silent meditation. Each evening before he went to bed, he spent 15 to 20 minutes in an examination of conscience. Once a week for a half day, he found a way to be alone in nature, and every month he spent a full day at a nearby monastery...As I listened to him I began to feel awful. My rule (of life) looked nothing like his, and his seemed much holier than mine...I wondered how I could add some of his activities to my day...I was not listening to my own heart for what I truly desired.”

We often miss the point of prayer, that it is about deep longing and not about following a rigid path to holiness as if God only approves of certain ways of prayer. Above all else prayer is about our intention and longing. What if we thought of prayer in response to these questions: What nourishes your spirit? Or what makes your heart sing?

Today we are invited to listen to how the Apostle Paul knew how prayer worked in his own life when he connected to that deep longing of his heart. Let's listen to his words in Philippians 4:4-9

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. **5** Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. **6** Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. **7** And the

peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about^[d] these things. **9** Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Paul wrote these words while in prison. The Philippians themselves were not doing that well either. They were few in number and adherents of a decidedly unpopular religion. A church filled with doubt and fear in the midst of a time of a corrupt empire. The people were facing dissension within and opposition without. And yet Paul exclaims, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice." He says that sixteen times in 4 chapters. So, how could he proclaim such hope and faith in the face of such pain and despair?

Paul was alive in prayer and in the Spirit. When his heart was opened to God and he tasted the deep joy of God's presence, his whole life became a prayer. His life circumstances did not improve. In fact, after following the way of Jesus, things got a lot harder for Paul. Paul had every reason to complain and to feel down, but because of his faith, he penned these beautiful words, "Rejoice in the Lord always." His deep awareness of the love of God helped him to see life from an eternal perspective and thus his prescription for prayer was to stay connected to the source of his deep joy even in times of great fear. In another scripture, Paul is described to be praying through singing in prison (Acts 16).

I invite you to make a list of the activities that nurture your soul. Are there new ways that you would like to explore? Without guilt or a sense of obligation, ponder what your soul is longing for? As Vennard recommends, "With the intention to honor God in all we do, the activities listed become the means to practice the presence of God (pray)."

There are many practices of prayer which others have passed on to us, but they are not the only ways to pray. Today, there are also many apps and websites with amazing tools for prayer. Here are a few recommendations:

- 3-minute retreat app and website: [3-Minute Retreats Daily Online Prayer | Loyola Press](#).
- Pray as you go app and website: [Pray as you go - Pray as you go \(pray-as-you-go.org\)](#)
- Centering Prayer app and website: [Centering Prayer Mobile App - Contemplative Outreach, Ltd.](#)
- The Presbyterian Daily Prayer: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/daily-prayer-pc-usa/id568520697?ls=1>
- Prayer app for youth and young adults: [d365 Daily Devotionals - devotions 365 days a year](#)

I invite you to turn to your neighbor and share about some of the things that nurture your soul.

When we are in a tough spot in life, we can hold on to what gives us life, our deeper awareness of God's presence in our lives. Our lives are unpredictable with so many things changing. I am especially thinking this week of the people of Turkey and Syria who were hit by a violent earthquake this past week. Their lives were turned upside down and their suffering is something we can only imagine. Yet, even in the midst of the most horrendous human experiences, God is with us. As Paul put it, "The God of peace will be with you." That is our deep hope and joy in life. What truly gives us life is our deep connection with God. Our very own breath is a reminder that our life is grounded in God's breath and presence. May we live by the wisdom of that deep desire and the spark of love and joy which God planted deep within us. Amen.