

Prayers From the Front

By Rev. Todd Farnsworth

2 Corinthians 1: 1-11



Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God in Corinth, together with all his holy people throughout Achaia: 2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of

all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. 5 For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. 6 If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. 7 And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. 8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters,[\[a\]](#) about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. 10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, 11 as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

Today's text should actually be labeled as 4th Corinthians because there are 2 missing letters before it (and 1 Corinthians).

- The first letter is known among scholars as “the lost letter” in which Paul tries to answer questions from the churches at Corinth.
- The second letter is known as 1 Corinthians (which includes the famous sections on the body of Christ and LOVE)
- The third letter is known as the “painful letter” in which Paul takes the churches to task for going astray from his leadership and following teachings that he finds antithetical to Jesus. This letter is also lost to us. We know about it because of references to the frank language used in it.
- And now we come to letter 4, which is Paul's attempt to win over the churches and redirect them to his cause, or as he likes to call it, the cause of Christ! I confess, I think the two are sometimes at odds with one another, but for today, we'll go with it.

Paul is writing as one who is on the front lines of a great battle for the souls of the church. Some members have been led away by false teachings. Others have been muddled by prophets who promise glory and riches and power. Social elevation, if you will. Most of the church in Corinth is made up of socioeconomically challenged folks, so an opportunity to move up the ladder sounds enticing.

Throughout history, the church has been tempted and torn by battles with the surrounding culture or events that strain its member's spirits. During WW2, our church found itself in spiritual strife after the new pastor, Wayne Nicholas, enlisted as a chaplain in the Navy. Letters between the Trustees

and Rev. Nicholas describe a church that is trying to maintain its faith during very stressful times.

In December of 1942, a few months after becoming the pastor of BCC, Wayne Nicholas announced that he had been accepted into the Navy as a chaplain. The congregation at the time sent him with their blessings and left the door open for his return after his time of duty was complete. The hope was in 1942, that the war would be winding down, and Rev. Nicholas would not be gone for too long. Unfortunately, by early 1945, the strain of his absence (despite letters from the front) were showing and members of the Board of Trustees wondered how the church could continue and thrive without a settled pastor.

On February 26, 1945, a mere three days after the flag was raised at Iwo Jima, John Nicol wrote to the pastor on behalf of the Trustees:

It has been a source of satisfaction to us to note the way in which the congregation has supported the church during these difficult years. We are now turning our thoughts to the role of our church in the post-war world and are trying to plan ways whereby it may be of greater service not only to the spiritual life of the members of the congregation but also to the whole community.

Although we feel that your definite plans for the future must of necessity depend upon the progress of the war, perhaps you may have formulated some general ideas as to your future work. If you have the opportunity, will you share your thoughts with us? Will you not write frankly so that we may know best how to prepare for the great work this is ahead of all of us?

Sincerely yours,

John Nicol.*

Rev. Nicholas responded on March 1, 1945. I will post his entire letter on the church website, but hear this section:

U. S. NAVAL AMMUNITION DEPOT
HINGHAM, MASSACHUSETTS

March 1, 1945

The Board of Deacons and the Board of Trustees
Briarcliff Congregational Church
Briarcliff Manor, New York

Dear Friends:

The kind and thoughtful letter of Mr. John Nicol, Secretary of the Board of Trustees, who has written me on your behalf, has reached me here at the Ammunition Depot and I shall write at once to reply.

At the very beginning, I want you all to know as members of the official boards of the church that I sincerely appreciate the spirit of your inquiry regarding my present wishes or future plans. I know well that it comes from a concern for the well-being and best welfare of the Briarcliff Church. I am very anxious that my letter shall convey to you the same mood of love for our church and a desire to do what is best for it.

It is a long time now since I left Briarcliff. Sometimes, when I remember those long months in the Pacific, it seems to me fully ten times as long and tedious. But measured in the committee meetings and emergencies you as the responsible officials of the church have had to meet in the absence of a regular pastor, I know well it has been an equally long and difficult time for you. I want to say, then, that I am very much aware these past two years have not been easy ones for the church. And it is a high tribute to the spirit of the members and the prayerful diligence of the Board of Deacons and the Board of Trustees that the church life and work have been sustained as they have been. I have been proud of my association with the church and the community, and grateful for the friendship of its people. This will always mean much to me, no matter what.

Yet at the same time ^{though} I knew that every church was feeling the impact of the war in some degree, I have realized how great was the burden of keeping on this long while without a minister. The disturbing part has always been that there was almost nothing I could do to lessen or even to share the responsibility all of you had to carry. No matter how much those who are in uniform may wish it otherwise the war sweeps them along, sending them where it will, demanding everything. The wishes of anyone individual are of no consequence. All personal plans must wait upon the winning of the war. Even now, after two years of service with eventual victory certain both in Europe and in the Pacific, I cannot tell you definitely when you could expect me to return. The break from a more normal way of life has been hard in every way - not the least part being the twenty months Marjorie had to manage alone - but I think the original conviction is much the same. So many other Americans were having their destiny decided for them under the compulsion of the

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law, and I believed that for me too there was a compulsion and an obligation. You will understand when I say that I would feel the same way were the decision mine to make again.

So, in answer to the question Mr. Nicol has asked in his letter, if the war were over now and if the Briarcliff people should still wish it so, I would look forward to the opportunity and privilege of returning to Briarcliff to begin again. I like to think I would be a better man and minister for having been a Navy chaplain, and perhaps in that sense the hardships the church has undergone in the war years would not have been borne without justification. If this were the only occasion for the present inquiry, and if the church in looking ahead to the peace wants simply to be assured as to what my own personal wishes might be, I am glad to confirm this feeling I have for the church and its people, and my desire to return to be your minister.

But under the circumstances of the immediate present it may rather be that the church now believes it necessary to make other pastoral arrangements. Knowing the people of the church, I know that if this step is being considered ~~again~~ it is being considered reluctantly and only because it is best.

This being true, let us say simply that I would like to return to Briarcliff, but that I understand perfectly why it may not be either possible or best for the church to continue on as at present, and because I wish its advancement more than my own I endorse whatever other arrangement may be made now or in the future to choose my successor. I would like to say that no intimation, official or otherwise, has been made that a change is being considered, but under the circumstances it would not be unexpected. I want you all to know that I have often wondered what I ought to do in fairness to the church, and perhaps this letter or one like it should have been written before. The only thing was that when I left the church in December, 1942, Mr. Pattison was in good health. And then again we all liked to think the war might be shorter than it seemed quite certain it would be, even then.

I say again that I want the church to take what action as may seem best, and I give my whole-hearted approval now in advance to any plan which is being made or will be made. I confess I will find it a little hard to think in terms of not going back to Briarcliff - as will Mrs. Nicholas - if that should be. But this is only a personal matter and can be put alongside the private plans so many others in all walks of life have had to abandon.

In any case, I feel I would like to come to Briarcliff in the near future to help in whatever way I can, to bow out gracefully if nothing more. If for any reason my presence is required immediately I could try to come during the week to meet with one or the other of the official boards. But I would much prefer to suggest instead the

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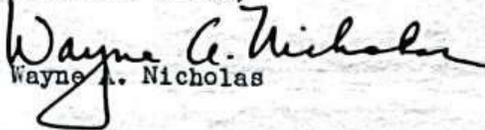
first part of next month - April. Would it be agreeable and convenient if I should plan to come to Briarcliff on the weekend of April 7-8? That would be the first Sunday after Easter. I would prefer to wait until then because the Senior Chaplain of the First Naval District has directed that the chaplains under him will not expect to be granted leave for any but emergency reasons until after Holy Week. I believe I could very properly think in terms of the weekend mentioned, however, inasmuch as I have reported in at the Depot seven days a week every single day except Christmas during the five months I have been stationed here.

If the suggested date is acceptable, I would like to conduct the morning service on that Sunday if I may. Then possibly in the afternoon there could be a joint meeting of the official boards to discuss plans or to confirm some plan already made, and in the evening I would be glad to stay over to meet with the young people. I know Mrs. Nicholas would want to make the trip to Briarcliff with me.

I sincerely hope that what I have tried to say in this long letter will make it clear that I feel the Briarcliff Church has all along done more for me, and you people there have been kinder and more generous in your understanding, than I have any reason to expect or deserve, and that whatever plans you may now feel it necessary to make I stand ready to promote them to the best of my ability. I know you will all understand that beyond any personal consideration I may have in the matter,--and it would be wrong to say Briarcliff does not mean much to me--I would put the best welfare of the Church.

With deep appreciation for the way you of the official boards have stood by the church in these trying war years, and with best wishes to each of you individually, I remain

Cordially yours,


Wayne A. Nicholas

Much like today's letter from Paul, these letters from WW2 between the pastor and Trustees demonstrate love and respect, honesty, and a faith

that transcends the words on the written page. They don't sugar coat the issues of concern, but compassionately seek to express their position.

I note this today because on this holiday weekend, in 2022, I believe we are trying to be faithful in the midst of a different kind of conflict. I believe that we are deep into a campaign that is being fought with bullets, and bodies, and rights, and truth, and our environment, and the question of who can declare what freedom looks like in our nation and who can experience it! I'm guessing that most of us find ourselves somewhere on the battlefield, on one side or another, or maybe somewhere in between. And as the war rages on and white supremacists march in through the streets of Boston during this weekend set aside to declare "Independence from tyranny", we *need* a letter of encouragement, a letter of hope, written in faith. We need to hear,

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. 7 And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. 8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters,[\[a\]](#) about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia.

We need to hear that although things are not rosy, with faith, we believe that God will see us through. And so I ask you, this weekend, this week, to write such a letter. Not an email, those are too fleeting, but a handwritten note or letter, to someone who may be struggling, and share, like Paul and Rev. Nicholas, and Mr. Nicol, the truth that you know. The struggles that you share. The hope that you hold in faith. Write in your own voice. Write from your heart. Write from your faith. And when you are finished, send it.

Send it to a particular person or send it to me for sharing with the wider body of faith. Send it so that those who you love will know that they are not alone and that God is by our side. Send it so that those who are muddled might be convinced by your faith that there is a faithful path through this wilderness time.

Paul wrote: We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. 10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, 11 as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

As we rebuild in the midst of our present culture wars, write to those who are struggling on the battlefield, and encourage them to continue in their faith. Let's reconnect and together, write to bring about the end of tyranny; write to bring about justice and liberty for all. Amen.

*Letter from John Nicol below

3/6/45

BRIARCLIFF CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
Briarcliff Manor, New York

February 26, 1945

Dear Mr. Nicholas:

From time to time you have written us about your activities as a chaplain, and we have gained some appreciation of the important contribution you are making to the religious life of the men and women of the Navy. While some of us, individually, have written you about the work the church is doing in your absence, we have not, as a group, kept you informed.

It has been a source of satisfaction to us to note the way in which the congregation has supported the church during these difficult years. We are now turning our thoughts to the role of our church in the post-war world and are trying to plan ways whereby it may be of greater service not only to the spiritual life of the members of the congregation but also to that of the whole community.

Although we feel that your definite plans for the future must of necessity depend upon the progress of the war, perhaps you may have formulated some general ideas as to your future work. If you have the opportunity, will you share your thoughts and plans with us? Will you not write frankly so that we may know best how to prepare for the great work that is ahead of all of us?

Sincerely yours,

(signed) JOHN NICOL
Secretary, Board of Trustees
Acting on Behalf of the
Board of Deacons and the
Board of Trustees.