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Why Am I Afraid?

by D'Esta Love

March, 1992

It is a familiar setting. It is the church that has nurtured me from my birth, and its beliefs, as well as its rhythms and practices, are ingrained in my very being and speak to who I am in my truest self. It is a setting pregnant with memory. It is the church at worship. It echoes the rich tones of singing, yea, even the sound of my own voice blended with those of the congregation. If I listen, I can almost hear the sermons of my husband and my father before him. This is a place that breathes comfort and blessing. This is my family; I am at home here.

This particular occasion is a Sunday evening service with its characteristic informality and ease, and the church has gathered to pray. Our minister has set the tone for the evening with a litany of individual and communal needs and concerns, blessings and praise, and he has invited the congregation to join him in prayer. The invitation is clear and unmistakable, "Anyone who wants to may pray." There have been numerous times before in worship services and moments for spontaneous prayer when I excluded myself because I knew that "anyone" did not mean "me." However, this time I am certain. I have been invited to pray.

As I sit beside my husband, I feel a growing eagerness and desire to give voice to the words welling up—for a lifetime—within me. But this is not the privacy of someone's home, or a gathering of women for a Bible class or special lecture series. This

is the sanctuary of the gathered church at prayer, and I have been invited to participate in what, until now, has been forbidden in my religious experience. Can I, after fifty-two years, break the silence? I listen silently and with pounding heart as one by one, with complete freedom and spontaneity, men stand again and again from all corners of the auditorium to pray. I marvel at the apparent ease with which they pray and at their unhalting flow of words that resonate with a familiarity unknown to me, and I sit frozen. I wait, and no woman stands to pray, nor do I. It is intensely intimidating. After a lifetime of silence in the sanctuary of God, I cannot utter a word.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, I am caught in a deep, internal struggle. I have been given permission, and I want to pray, but I cannot. The tears which accompany the tightening in my throat are of hurt, anger, shame and fear. This is my church home; yet, for the first time in my life I feel fear in the house of God. I am surrounded by people who love me, and I am comfortable here. The minister has extended me an invitation to pray—so why am I afraid?

I am afraid because my roots are deep in the soil of my faith and the religious tradition of my childhood. I am afraid because I do not want to shatter the calm or disturb the peace I feel in this place. I know that there are those present who will be offended if I pray—who will consider my prayer a violation of a direct command from the Word of God.

The “forbidden” words I am about to utter could leave turmoil in their wake. I love this church and all it represents to me and others, and I do not want to harm it.

I am afraid because of the memories that rush into my mind. I remember how I felt thirty years ago when the elders removed Randy from my Sunday school class. He was ten years old and had been baptized the previous week. Thus, Randy was a baptized male believer, and it was considered unsuitable for me, a woman, to continue teaching him the stories of Jesus. I also remember, several years later, when the elders of another congregation asked Stuart and me to teach a Wednesday night class in the church auditorium. At the conclusion of our lesson on John 13, an individual stood and expressed his disapproval and declared that we had set a dangerous precedent. To conclude his remarks, he read 1 Peter 3:1-6. As I sat on the front pew before the congregation, the words exhorting a woman to adorn herself in “a gentle and quiet spirit” made me feel exposed and shameful, and they ring in my ears as I contemplate accepting this invitation to pray.

I am also afraid because I do not want an impulsive act on my part to hinder any progress that has been made concerning women and the utilization of their gifts in the church. Yet, this is not impulsive. I have been invited to pray. So why am I afraid? I am afraid of hearing the sound of my solitary voice in this place of worship and among the congregation of the Lord. Although I hear the words of my prayer over and over in my silent self, I cannot speak them. Perhaps if I had begun as a child, I would be less fearful. After all, we only had “training classes” for boys, and girls of my generation did not pray in any setting—including devotionals. Is it too late for me to bring my gift to the altar? After fifty-two years of silence, have I grown mute? Are there no words I can utter “to ascribe thee glory and honor”? “What language shall I borrow to thank thee, dearest friend, for this thy dying sorrow, thy pity without end?”

September, 1992

It is another familiar setting, but less nurturing and comforting than the security and peace of the church at worship. It is Firestone Fieldhouse, the gymnasium on the campus of Pepperdine University. The occasion is our weekly convocation, and I have been asked by the president of the university to open the 1992-93 academic year with a prayer. As the dean of students, I have stood before this audience week after week for four years. I have presided over the program, introduced guest speakers and even shared my faith. Today, I have been asked to pray. It is a simple thing. So why am I afraid?

I am afraid because I have known of this assignment for weeks. It has been a weighty decision for the university, one that was made after two years of prayerful and diligent study. Although I had no part in making the decision, I participated in many of the discussions, and I am well aware of the sensitivity involved, as well as the possible ramifications. It has been a courageous decision for the university to make, and I anticipate it will be controversial. Until now, women have not been allowed to lead prayer or read scripture in our convocation programs. Today we are empowering our women to participate fully in the spiritual life of the university.

I am empowered by the significance of the moment, but I am apprehensive and fearful about the exposure, not just for the university, but for me. I know that my name will be attached to this prayer, and word of my participation will spread. As the daughter of a preacher, I know too well the concern about what others will think. I fear my motives will be critiqued by people who do not know me, in places I have never been. I also know I will be labeled and judged by individuals who do not know my heart. And I am fearful of censure from those who know and love me.

Why am I afraid? I am fifty-two years old, and yet I fear the disapproval of my parents. I know that my father always encouraged my mother and his daughters to pray at home. I also know he invited women to pray in the numerous ladies’ Bible classes he taught (a bold move in his day). But I do not know what my parents will think about this decision and my part in it. On the other hand, I am concerned that this public prayer will bring criticism to my parents and their ministry, as well as to our son and his work in the Kingdom.

Why am I afraid? Due to the public nature of this prayer, I am once again haunted by memories of other public experiences in which I faced disapproval. On one such occasion, Stuart and I conducted a weekend seminar for a congregation and taught side by side in the “private” space of the fellowship hall. We were also asked to teach a combined adult Bible class on Sunday morning, conducted in the “public” space of the auditorium. Stuart introduced our lesson, while I stood at his side. The moment I began to speak, part of the audience rose and walked out. I vividly remember how the minister, after the class was over, wept unabashedly as he extended his sincere and earnest apology to us. I also remember when we were introduced to a Wednesday night audience in the auditorium of another congregation. At the last minute, it occurred to the individual presenting us to “put it to a vote” as to whether I should be allowed to teach with Stuart. One person

objected, so I was asked to remain seated while Stuart taught the class. These were uncomfortable moments, and I feel that discomfort today.

I feel the weight of the past and the responsibility placed in my hands as I await the beginning of convocation. I express my fears to Stuart, who stands beside me. His words ring clearer and truer than any others, "Do not be afraid. Forget about what others will think or say. When you step to the podium, just enter your closet and pray." I feel I am being called to courage. "Prince of Peace control my will; bid this struggling heart be still. Bid my fears and doubtings cease; hush my spirit into peace."

March, 1996

I did step into my closet when I led that prayer four years ago, and it was a singular moment in my spiritual pilgrimage. A deep and abiding calm came over me, and I felt anointed by God's spirit. Since then, I have led other prayers in convocation. There have been other invitations to pray at Sunday evening prayer services, and I have found the courage to respond. I am still fearful, but I am less so (in fact, I have never been comfortable leading prayer in any setting). I am discovering that most of my fears are unfounded although a few are very real. News of my first prayer in convocation did appear in numerous church bulletins and journals. One headline read, "A Late Item on D'Esta Love of Pepperdine University." It informed the congregation that "There are indeed wolves among us" and concluded with a final pronouncement, "Depart from me, I NEVER knew you." I received letters from people I did not know telling me I should "hang my head in shame." However, I received far more letters and calls expressing encouragement.

I also found occasion to talk with my parents about my fears and my views concerning greater opportunities for women to use their gifts in the Kingdom. To my surprise, I found they were encouraging and supportive. I regretted I had not discussed these matters with them before, but I had been afraid. Their love and support have given me courage, and we have been liberated to explore together with openness and trust the hidden and unspoken concerns of our hearts. The captives have been set free, for it is fear that enslaves us.

I am also encouraged by the prayers of other

women and am discovering that I am not alone in my journey. I have found both men and women who are faithfully searching God's word to discover his will as we face the issues regarding Christian ministry for women in the church. We are finding tools for the analysis of scripture which allow us to view the role of women in the larger context of scripture, rather than allow two heavily disputed passages to relegate women to a silent role.

Also, I am much less fearful today because I see positive change taking place. The days when Randy was removed from my Sunday school class are almost gone. Rarely are Stuart and I censured for teaching

scripture together in any setting. Greater avenues of service are opening for women in the church, and we are doing a better job of helping men and women identify their gifts in the Kingdom. We have more women in graduate Bible programs in our Christian colleges, preparing to give their lives to the service of the Lord, and I am confident he will find ways to use them. We live in a time of struggle and change, but I believe it is a time of courage and hope.

This is my personal journey, and I am becoming more courageous in my faith. I do not mean to imply that I am "charging the gates"; I am not. But I am less content to hide behind my "walls of silence." I feel a sense of obligation to others who are making this journey, and I am empowered to make myself known. I am more secure in my understanding of scripture that calls me to witness to my faith, to lend my voice in praise to my king, to "lift up holy hands" and speak his name in prayer.

Questions for discussion:

1. Have any of you had similar experiences? Is this an experience unique to women in the church?
2. To what extent should we trust our feelings? Is something wrong simply because it causes us to be uncomfortable?
3. What can we do to break down the barriers of fear and empower men and women to use their gifts freely?
4. Why does the author always place her experiences within the realm of an invitation? What is significant about an invitation, and is it necessary or helpful?

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