

“Just A Prayer” GPPC 9-22-19  
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1, 1 Timothy 2:1-7

The Revised Common Lectionary (a three-year cycle of scripture readings from the Old and New Testaments) suggests the readings from Jeremiah and 1 Timothy for this Sunday.

You don't hear too many sermons based on passages from 1 Timothy. So a little background about the book is in order. Scholars believe it was probably written by an anonymous writer around 90-100 A.D.. Though the letter is attributed to Paul, most Bible experts think someone else wrote it. And, as was the custom of the time, Paul is credited as the author as an honor, and as a way of saying that the letter follows the trajectory of his thought.

1 Timothy was written to a church that was quarreling, struggling not just with various personalities but with doctrine and behavior within the community. So the writer says later in the letter (1 Timothy 3:14-15), “I am writing these instructions to you so that...you may know how you ought to behave in the household of God.” In other words, as a seminary professor puts it, these are “instructions for how Christians should

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behave both inside and outside of the church.” (Lewis R. Donelson, *Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, The Westminster Bible Companion, 117.)

In chapter two, the writer suggests a strategy. “First of all,” he says, “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions...”

What do you notice about this urging? Maybe you notice that a variety of types of prayer are mentioned—supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings. It may feel a bit redundant, but the writer is covering almost every kind of prayer.

What else do you notice about what the writer commends regarding prayer? “Everyone.” He urges prayer for everyone, for all. Reading between the lines we wonder if maybe people in that church had a prayer list alright, but not everybody was on the list. Maybe only their friends had made the cut. Instead the writer says we are to pray for everyone, for all.

But then he goes to meddling even more by saying we are to pray for “kings and all who are in high positions.” Why is that? Are they

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especially worthy of prayer, because they are so lofty or so holy? Or are we to pray for them for another reason?

In a sermon many years ago, my favorite professor from seminary wrote, “It is easy to forget our claim to truth. It is easy for the preacher to say something easier or more popular than the truth of the gospel. [Someone] tells the story of a church in Sweden. One Sunday the hero King Charles the Twelfth visited the church by surprise. The minister was so excited he decided to ignore the gospel for one Sunday. Instead he preached a lengthy and touching eulogy on the qualities of the King and the royal family. A few months later the church received a gift from King Charles. It was a crucifix. Included with the gift were these instructions: ‘This is to hang on the pillar opposite the pulpit so that all who preach there will be reminded that Christ is their proper subject.’ [My professor concludes.] We are to speak the truth, the truth of the gospel.” (David L. Bartlett, a sermon, “Speaking The Truth In Love,” September 10, 1978.)

As a nation we have recently recalled the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on our country eighteen years ago. Immediately after those attacks in 2001, congregations responded in numerous ways. Some, as

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did the church I was serving at the time, had formal and informal worship services for sharing our grief and our hope. We encouraged people to provide money to help victims and to give blood (even though we later learned that the hospitals had more than enough blood for the need). Leaders reminded congregants not to scapegoat Muslims or people of Middle Eastern descent. I had a lunch meeting already scheduled with an executive presbyter, and she chose for us to eat at a restaurant run by folks from the Middle East. These were faithful responses in a fearful and confusing time.

Sadly, some congregations responded by literally covering their pulpits with American flags, turning worship services into nationalistic pep rallies, and by adopting a theology in which narrow patriotism and obedience to Christ were so interlocked as to be indistinguishable from each other.

A crucifix hanging across from the pulpit might have been helpful.

Christ is Lord of the church, and Lord of the world. And Christ is the proper subject of preaching and adoration. So why does the writer of

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1 Timothy not only ask for prayers for “everyone,” but then makes a special mention of “kings and all who are in high positions”?

The answer is in the second part of the sentence. “So that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.” We are to pray for persons in “high positions,” elected office, elected representatives “so that *we* may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.” It is the responsibility of elected representatives to try to create conditions for us to lead quiet, peaceable, godly, and dignified lives.

Presbyterians in particular have focused on this responsibility of our elected representatives. You may know that the American Revolution was sometimes called “the Presbyterian Revolt” because so many of the colonists who led the rebellion against the oppression of King George III were Presbyterians who took their cues for freedom and fair treatment straight from scripture. At least 14 signers of the Declaration of Independence were Presbyterians. John Witherspoon was the only clergyperson to sign the declaration. And what was his denomination? Presbyterian.

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As one commentator says, “Being prayerful for political leaders is one thing, being blindly submissive to them is quite another.” (Carl R.

Holladay in, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year C, After Pentecost*, 174-175.)

So we pray for elected representatives to work with us to create a better world. We don't expect them to bring in the kingdom of God in all its fullness. That's what God will finally accomplish.

But we do pray for them and expect them to help shape a world for all people that is quiet not inflamed, peaceable and whole not hate-filled tyranny, godly not demonic, and dignified not dehumanized. Elected representatives are elected not just to collect a paycheck or to wield partisan power but to help move us just a little bit closer to God's shalom that God will finally bring to fruition. We expect that.

Then notice how the writer of 1 Timothy continues his argument for prayer for everyone. He says, “This is right and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. There's one God; one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus...who gave himself a ransom for all. For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle...”

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Simply put, there's one God, and one mediator between God and humanity—Jesus Christ. And this Jesus Christ died on the cross, gave his life as a ransom, as a payment for the freedom of humanity. Why? Because God wants “everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Why? Because God loves not just some people but all people and God refuses to give up on us.

So if God “desires everyone to be saved and to come the knowledge of the truth,” then who's going to stop God? Maybe you say, “We can stop God by exercising our own free will.” But if I save myself by saying “yes” to God with my life and I damn myself by saying “no” to God with my life, am I not more powerful than God who wants to save everyone? Have I not usurped God's power? And what if I partially turn to God, but partially turn away (as we sinful people always do)? How much is enough? And am I now leaning toward “works righteousness”?

We do not know. And the writer leaves final destinations as a mystery safe in the hands of God. But he leaves no mystery about what we are to assume and what we are to do. We are to assume that God

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loves *all* people. And we are to pray for all people, because God loves them all and God wants them to be saved and to know the truth.

Professor William Willimon tells the following story as an illustration, [language edited for worship, don't try this at home, *not* as something for us to repeat literally]. “‘Our son has been putting us through hell,’ she said. ‘Didn’t even know where he was for months until last night. My husband and I were eating dinner, and suddenly, without warning, he bursts through the front door and begins cursing us, demanding money, refusing to join us at the table. After an ugly scene, he stormed down the hall and slammed the door to his room . . . ’

“‘Well, my husband gets up, goes over to the kitchen, pours himself a drink, turns on the TV, and slumps down in his chair. That’s how he handles these moments. I walked down the hall and said, ‘Son, can we talk? I just want to talk.’ I could hear him curse me from inside his bedroom. I tried to open the door. It was locked.

“‘So I went into the garage, got a big hammer, walked back in, stood before my son’s bedroom door, drew back, and with only one blow was

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able to knock the doorknob clean off the door. Took about a third of the door with it. Then I lunged at my surprised-looking son, grabbed him ... and said, 'I'm not going to put up with this [junk] anymore. You are better than this! I gave birth to you, went into labor for you, and I'm not giving you away!'

“I really think something important happened for us last night. I think he heard me. We're on the right track,' she said.” And Willimon concludes, “I believe God is something like that.” (William H. Willimon, *Who Will Be Saved?*, 67.)

We are to pray for all people, especially elected representatives, because God loves all people and God is relentless is bringing us to God, teaching us the truth, making a world that moves towards wholeness and peace. And our part in this begins, but doesn't end, with just a prayer.

Amen. ©Jeff Paschal