

On a Wing and a Prayer
15th Sunday after Pentecost - Year C - 09/22/2019
Psalm Reading: 79:1-9
1st Reading: Luke 16:1-13, 2nd: 1 Timothy 2:1-7

You know every week, just before the end of the service we have a pastoral prayer. Prayers of this nature have been lifted up regularly since ancient times. In fact, this letter to Timothy that we read today indicates that this is something that we should be doing, and doing together as a corporate body.

The opening of this letter tells us that it is from the Apostle Paul, presumably while he was in Prison in Rome. It is to Timothy, his protege, the person Paul chose to mentor. Timothy was being groomed from a fairly young age to become a bishop and an evangelist in the mold of Paul himself. The letters of first and second Timothy are like a little instruction manual for new pastors. Paul's goal was to bring Timothy into a life in Christ and to help him to understand how to spread the gospel and how to be a leader in the church.

In our passage for today, Paul writes, *"I urge you then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people..."* (1 Tim 2:1, NIV) And I think Paul, just by the way he phrases this sentence, is indicating that these prayers should be done as a body, within the Body of Christ. Further, Paul also tells Timothy what we should be praying about.

First, he mentions “petitions”. And what is a petition, but a formal request. We are asking God for something. And this something can be for ourselves or it can be for others.

You know for the longest time, I thought that praying for myself was a selfish act. So I refrained from doing it. “Only pray for others.” I thought. But you know, when Christ gave us the Lord’s prayer he said “give us this day our daily bread.” That is a request for ourselves. When we make a petition for health and even for financial success, I think we do so with the knowledge and understanding that God desires what is good for us. God is looking to our well-being. But there is also the implication that when we benefit, that we will also benefit others.

Ultimately, when I pray for myself, I think it is most appropriate to pray for things like stronger faith, greater courage, moral persuasiveness, a loving heart, better memory, focused concentration, and, because it would make my wife happy, better hearing or perhaps just better listening skills.

I am often thinking of these things when I write our pastoral prayer for the week. But since the pastoral prayer is truly from all of us I pray for these qualities for all of us.

But Paul also writes to Timothy of intercessory prayer. What is he talking about here? I think he means a prayer where we are making requests for others, to help them in some kind of ongoing situation. I think this especially applies to the medical condition of most people. Whenever you get a large group of people together, there are going to be health issues among us. Whether that be a toothache or something far more serious that requires surgery or some other extreme

intervention by a doctor. It is only right to pray for God's healing power, as well as God's comfort and love.

As you may have noticed, I do not typically use last names in the pastoral prayer, unless it is a specific request from an individual. This is to help protect the privacy of individuals. Also, I do not generally go into too much detail. This also helps maintain privacy. God surely knows already who we are praying for and what help they need. And to be honest, most of us know as well. This is not to say that you cannot be specific with your own requests because you are all in control of the level of privacy you wish to maintain or the people you are praying for wish to maintain.

Intercessory prayer and prayer in general is important for many reasons. But perhaps primary among them is that it makes us aware of the needs within our community and among our members. God gave us prayer for our own benefit, not for God's benefit. When we pray, it is not like we are a worldwide network keeping God informed of what is going on in the world. We pray so that we know, so that we understand in our hearts, that God is aware of what is going on, and we can rest assured that God will do something about it.

Our passage also enjoins us to lift up our voices in praise for a God that is so good to us, what Paul refers to as prayers of thanksgiving. In some churches the pastoral prayer is sometimes referred to as "Joys and Concerns". Usually the stress is on the concerns even though we certainly do have much to be joyful about. This of course, reminds us that the Lord is the font of all that is good in the world. As creator, God

gave us life, and put us here not to simply undergo perpetual suffering, but to experience some of the joys of this existence.

I think, perhaps one of the benefits of such communal prayer is that it can spur us to action on many fronts. When we learn of illness, or learn of a need, then with a little thought we may find that there may be something that we can do about it. I am a firm believer in praxis, that is taking theory or theology, and putting it into action in the real world. Speaking and hearing prayers is a step to doing just that. Until we voice a need, that need can never be fulfilled, because we do not even know that the need is.

Then Paul singles out a specific group of people to pray for. He writes, *“for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”* (v.2) Paul wants us to pray for all leaders. Remember, at the time the two letters to Timothy were written these letters were circulated to more than just Timothy and everyone being addressed would have been within the bounds of the Roman Empire. Persecution could come down upon them at any minute. This was a good immediate reason to pray for those in authority. Of course, we do not have kings, but we still have good reason to pray for our leaders, considering what effects their actions can have within the nation and around the world.

I confess, I do not always pray for people in authority, mainly because I am thinking locally. But, it is something that should be done. Such prayers should go out for a president or governor or lawmaker regardless of what you think of them or what political party they might be from. The key, I think, is to pray that whatever actions they take have a beneficial effect

that radiates out into the world. But I don't think this applies only to civil government, but church government as well. We should be praying for our deacons and elders all year round not just when they reaffirm their faith when they are elected or re-elected in the fall. And of course, you can always remember your pastor in private prayer as well.

In verses 3 and 4 of chapter 2 Paul tells us, *"This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."* I think these two verses reveal a salient fact. That our God is a relational God who loves us, and wants to keep us informed of God's will. God only gives us what is good. And the knowledge that God wants us all to be saved, is good knowledge, indeed, it is Good News. It is the best news that we could ever hear. Christ wants all to be saved. And in this line we can see a little more than a hint that praying is something we do that brings us a little closer to salvation.

Finally, in verses 5 and 6 Paul says, *"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for all people. So, Jesus walked the earth as a human being. We accept that Christ is fully divine and fully human. This means that this mediator we have in Christ, in God, is one that understands who we are, how we think, how we are tempted. And this is the kind of mediator we want, because we know full well how much we have sinned and how much we need a mediator who understands us.*

As you know, we have been asking congregation members to write down prayers on slips of colored paper and the Sunday school kids have been connecting them into a prayer chain. This

chain is a great representation of how when we pray together we are bound together in one spirit. When we pray together we are working toward the same goal, which is the ultimate good for all people.

It is hard to over-emphasize the importance and the power of prayer, especially communal prayer. It is the primary way in which we maintain our connection, our relationship, with God, and by praying together we stretch our relationship with one another. You know, this is our primary means of communication with God. In prayer we talk to God, and we receive our response when God answers our prayers, as God surely will. So, I encourage you all to keep the lines of communication open. We should pray with each other at every opportunity. It's not only good for the soul, but it will make us better people in the long run.

Please put yourselves in a posture for prayer...

O Holy God, you are set apart to be the most high God, and yet you are ever accessible to us. When we pray you listen with an open heart and an understanding mind when we honestly pour ourselves out to you. No matter how much we have sinned, no matter how much we have ignored you in the past, you consult our intercessor Jesus, and you wipe away our sin. You hear our petitions. You internalize our prayers. You intercede in human affairs. You take note of our thanksgivings. And then you cleanse our hearts and we come to know that you are our God and we are your people. We pray all of this in the name of J.C. our Lord.

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