

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 18th Sunday After Pentecost, Sept.18, 2016

Pray for Everyone
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
September 18, 2016

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Who do you pray for? Most of us pray for our families, our friends and neighbors --- particularly those with medical or other problems, people in our community, and often for our political leaders, police, EMTs and firefighters, and our military.

We often pray for ourselves --- that an illness will be healed, that difficulties we encounter will work out, that financial problems will be solved, and more.

Those kinds of prayer are what we expect people to pray for and there is nothing wrong with that but in our scripture reading from 1 Timothy, Paul is telling us that our prayers need to be broader than that. He tells us to pray for everyone, without exception. Without exception? Yes, without exception!

What about dictators? Would you have prayed for Adolph Hitler or Muammar Gaddafi?

What about notorious criminals like Al Capone or Babyface Nelson?

What about terrorists and terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda and ISIS?

Yes, pray for all of them and all like them!

When Paul wrote his letter to Timothy, Nero was emperor of Rome and Paul said to “...*pray for kings and all those in authority.*” In other words pray for Nero, a cruel monster who cruelly persecuted Christians.

Peter said, “... *fear God, honor the emperor.*” (1 Peter 2:17).

Pray for Nero --- honor him! That would have been incredibly hard to do just as it would be for us to pray for Vladimir Putin or Kim Jong-un. In this election season we may be praying for our political party and our favored candidate. But also praying for the other political party and the other candidate would be very difficult to do. And what if you don't care for either of the Presidential candidates, could you pray for both of them?

Praying for everyone seems to be an oxymoron, doesn't it? Why should you pray for people you disagree with or people who are evil and corrupt?

William Barclay ⁽¹⁾ explained that praying for these kinds of people “... *was a*

cardinal principle of communal Christian prayer. Emperors might be persecutors and those in authority might be determined to stamp out Christianity. But the Christian Church never, even in the times of bitterest persecution, ceased to pray for them... The Church regarded it as an absolute duty to pray for the Emperor and his subordinate kings and governors."

Why did the early church pray for these people and why should we pray for the types of people I mentioned earlier?

It is fundamental that we pray for everyone, as hard as that may be at times. 1 Timothy says, *"This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."*

Leslie F. Brandt has expressed Paul's epistles in poetic form with today's scripture reading as:

"God wants everyone to come to salvation. His Son died with that as its goal. That is why we should pray for everyone.

God's commission to His children concerns the spiritual welfare of all men and women.

This means that God's will, our objective, is the salvation of the whole human family.

We should, of course, offer our prayers to God on behalf of, and extend our efforts to witness in word and deed to, every human being --- from our leaders and executives in high places to the laborer, the poor, the uneducated, and the oppressed.

There is only one God, and that is the God that Christ revealed.

This is the only God that we can worship and serve, and we are the ministers of this God to the people of our world.

Salvation does not come to us by way of the Law, but the accepting and propagating of God's love through Christ does impose upon us certain responsibilities."

The charge to pray for everyone goes against our grain with respect to certain individuals but it is what God wants us to do, as hard as that may be.

In a way, our scripture reading is telling us to act as the apostles did when they were fishermen. They cast a wide net to bring in as many fish as possible. Then Jesus told them to instead fish for people.

Our scripture reading is telling us to cast a wide net, a net of prayer for all

humanity.

The prophet Ezekiel said, *“Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? Declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?”* (Ezek. 18:23) and *“For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone ... Repent and live!”* (Ezek. 18:32).

And in 2 Peter 3:9 we read, *“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”*

Fred Craddock, et al ⁽³⁾, said, *“At the heart of our faith are exclusive claims: one God and one mediator, Christ Jesus. Yet their saving grace is all-embracing, for God through Christ intended to ransom all. Just as their salvation was universal on scope, so should our prayers reach beyond ourselves to all humanity ...*

“... We confess the one God and the one mediator, Jesus Christ, and in doing so separate ourselves from those who cannot and will not confess likewise. Yet our text will not allow us to become a Christian ghetto where we pray only to ourselves. As squarely as we stand within our confession we nonetheless are bound to see beyond it.”

Pray for everyone, even those with whom you disagree, to accept Christ and for their salvation. That is the message of our scripture reading today or, putting it in another familiar way, pray without ceasing.

Amen.

(1) William Barclay, The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, rev. ed., Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975.

(2) Leslie F. Brandt, Epistles / Now, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1976

(3) Fred B. Craddock, et al, Preaching Through the Christian Year— Year B, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, PA, 1993.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011.