

Proper 20C— 1 Timothy 2:1-8
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Praying for Politicians

Years ago, I was asked by a parishioner why she should have to pray for the president in worship. (Our church had a habit of praying for the president, governor and mayor every Sunday, and she wasn't a fan of the administration.) I told her that, yes, we pray for our leaders, but the Prayer Book doesn't say what you should pray for them!

Some months later, though, I gained a deeper appreciation of the matter when I was watching *House of Cards*, a political thriller on Netflix. The show is something of a guilty pleasure, far from edifying, yet amazingly engrossing. The show is about the rise to power of a man named Frank Underwood. Underwood starts out as the House Majority Whip, but, after he's passed over by the new President for appointment as Secretary of State, he decides to exact his revenge on those who betrayed him. By the end of the second season, he manages through duplicity, exploitation, extortion and outright murder, to get his revenge and become the President of the United States. Now, Underwood is a thoroughly despicable man, a ruthless, scheming, heartless, son-of-a-gun. Someone who is willing to use the weaknesses of everyone around him to get ahead and feed his ego. And yet, halfway through the third season I found myself actually rooting for him. It wasn't that I liked the guy, or admired him. Up to that point, I had been eagerly looking forward to the whole house of cards to come falling down on him. But now, things were different. I wanted him to succeed, to exercise good judgement, to rise above his pettiness and corrupt character and exercise power for the good of the country. Reflecting on this change of heart, it struck me that Underwood was no longer just an evil man; as president, he was responsible for the nation. What he said and did affected not just him, but the whole country, for good or for ill. This observation gave me an insight into why we pray for our leaders. We should want our leaders to succeed, maybe not all of their ill-conceived ideas and policies to succeed, but we want those in power, regardless of party affiliation, to do what is right, to use their power to improve the freedom, justice and prosperity of the country. Because when our rulers do well, the people prosper.

That certainly seems to be what is behind, or at least is part of what is behind, this morning's lesson from 1 Timothy. Paul writes to his apprentice Timothy, saying, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way." Christians, we understand, are to pray for those in power because when they succeed, when rulers exercise their authority properly, wisely, justly, the country flourishes.

As reasonable as that may seem in the abstract, if you know anything about the situation of Paul and the early church, you can appreciate how amazing, even shocking, it is that Paul tells the church they need to pray for those in power. I mean, the people Paul say Christians should pray for were by all accounts really evil people. And not a few of them actively tried to crush the Church and stifle the very Gospel that Paul wants Timothy's church to proclaim. As a matter of fact,

Paul himself will die at the hands of such governing authorities not too long from now. As will most of the other Apostles too. It would be nearly two more whole centuries before the governing authorities stopped actively seeking to destroy the Church. Worse, the emperor encouraged his subjects to worship him, to see him as divine, *Deus et Dominus*, God and Lord of the Empire, an idolatrous cult if ever there was one. And yet Paul instructs his readers to offer supplications, prayers, intercessions, even *thanksgivings* on behalf of these wicked rulers! And you thought it was hard to pray for Obama, Hillary, and Trump!

One thing the early Church was very clear about is that, no matter what divine titles and privileges the Emperor gave himself, the real ruler, the true King was Jesus, not Caesar. And yet no matter how wicked the Emperor was, no matter how wickedly, unjustly he governed, the Church never questioned the legitimacy of the Emperor's rule. Paul says in his letter to the Romans: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God." In other words, all power comes from God, including Caesar's power, and so the emperor is *ordained by God* to rule.

Wow! Is that true for tyrants in our day, Kim Jung Un and Putin and the Ayatollah and Mugabe too? Are they God-ordained as well? This strikes many of us today as ridiculous, and intolerable. Caesar is accountable to God, we insist, and if he fails in exercising God's justice then he doesn't deserve to rule. If the Emperor doesn't recognize that, then the people need to revolt. There needs to be a revolution! Down with the Emperor...or at least defund him!

And yet no Christian in the Roman Empire ever sought or even suggested overthrowing the Emperor. It would be laughable if they tried, utterly impracticable—the church was a ridiculously small sect *who also forbade its members from causing bloodshed*. So armed revolt was completely out of the question. But there was a more profound reason why they didn't seek revolution. People in Paul's day saw revolution as a wholly bad thing, as something to be avoided at all cost, because political instability was worse than having a bad ruler.

We in America have a rather romanticized view of revolution. I think of the recent Broadway play, *Hamilton*, and how brashly the characters sang: "You want a revolution? I want a revelation. *For the revolution!*" As beneficiaries of our country's successful revolt against Britain, we think every country should rebel if their ruler oppresses the people. What we don't realize is that, when it comes to armed rebellions, the American Revolution was exceptional, not the rule. The vast majority of revolutions throughout the world have ended badly, coming at great financial and human cost and generally leaving the people in a worse situation than they were before. Think of the French Revolution and Robespierre's Reign of Terror, the bloody Communist takeover in Russia, or the even more brutal Communist Revolution in China—all of which ended with millions of casualties. Then you have Castro's Cuban Revolution in the 50s, the Iranian Revolution in the 70s, war in the Balkans following the breakup of Yugoslavia, and the Arab Spring that led to ISIS. Armed revolutions generally don't end well, leading to great scores dead and putting into office tyrants who are even more ruthless than those they replaced.

Paul of course was writing centuries before any of these revolutions. And yet the people of his day would have been plenty familiar with what it means when a king or emperor is overthrown—it creates a power vacuum, which leads to war, with troops traipsing through fields

ripe with crops, destroying, raping and pillaging as they went, threatening everyone, generally making life miserable. Little wonder that the first Christians and most people throughout history have prized stability and peace over all else. For when order breaks down, the first casualty is justice. That was reason enough for why Christians should pray for those in power, that there would protect be order and social stability.

So does that mean that Christians living in the Roman Empire had no recourse, no hope this side of heaven, that they would just have to accept the status quo, no matter how awful and evil the Emperor was? Well, yeah. When it came to influencing the political leaders of the day, or even “improving society,” there was little that they could do.

We, however, can boast that, as citizens of the United States, we do have a say in our government. We can vote, we can write letters to our representatives, we can engage in political organizations and join protests and we can post snarky comments on social media. And yet, many of us still feel impotent. We think that, despite all these avenues of influence, there is nevertheless little that any of us can do to direct the decision-making of our leaders, to get done what we see as good and right and necessary. We just don’t have the money, the connections, the voting blocs to influence those in power.

It's as if, despite all the social and political advances since Paul’s day, we are in a place not all that different from the place Paul and the first Christians were in. So, Paul encourages the church of his day, as well as today, “to pray for kings and all who are in high positions,” that they “may be led to wise decisions and right actions for the welfare and peace of the world.” So that’s another reason we pray for those in authority—that their hearts may be changed and so rule in a godly, just way.

That may not seem like much of a strategy, but prayer may be the only thing that can break through the power-politics and influence-peddling that enslave worldly leaders. I’ll give you an example of what I mean. On the night of October 8, 1989, more than 70,000 citizens mobilized in the streets of Leipzig, Germany. Before the march, the pastor of St. Nicholas’ Church insisted that the demonstrators put down their rocks as this was a *nonviolent* demonstration. Meanwhile, security officials waited for instructions from Moscow and Berlin on using force to subdue the demonstrators. The order never came, and the police gave up. A month later the Berlin Wall fell. Recalling the Leipzig protest, the security chief who wanted to crush the rebellion explained, “We planned for everything, everything!...except for candles and prayers.”

There’s another reason why we pray for those in power. We pray to change the hearts of rulers, yes, but we pray also to change our own hearts. Bitterness, even hatred of those in the ‘other party’ is rife in our country, egged on by desperate politicians, those in media and other thought leaders. It’s no longer politics as usual. Our disagreements are made out now to be an existential battle for the future of our country, as if we are locked in a battle of good versus evil, with our neighbors not just our opponents but our enemies. There are even those who flippantly, even gleefully, talk of a second civil war. That is not what you see in the streets of our cities and towns, in stores, and in everyday relationships, of course. Yet talk of such things constitutes a great danger to our civil life, but it is an even graver danger to our souls. For when we label half

the country as evil, what we are doing is dehumanizing our neighbor, even demonizing them, for no greater crime than thinking differently, holding different values than we hold.

Praying for our leaders, whether we agree with them or not, reminds us that they are human. Or to quote the title of one book I read, “Presidents are people too.” To Paul, those in authority, even the wicked emperor who persecutes God’s people, are still just other humans in need of God’s mercy and grace. We may be tempted to pray only for people whom we like, and pray that God will change those we don’t. But Paul is inviting us to pray for our leaders because the point of prayer is to change the pray-er, to transform our hearts, to align us more with Christ, to attune our heart with God “who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Indeed, Paul makes clear that the ultimate goal of prayer is nothing short of salvation, the salvation of all. That’s the ultimate reason for praying.

Consider: We pray for our leaders so that in the context of the stable society they rule we can proclaim to all who is the REAL King of kings and Lord of lords. We pray for a change of heart and mind in our leaders, so that God’s justice, peace, and freedom may be established and preserved. And we pray for our leaders, even the ones we don’t like, in order that through praying we may be made into people who can better bear the Good News to others, that we might, in Paul’s words, lead lives of godliness and dignity, lives that others around us might see as attractive. This is “good and pleasing in God’s eyes.”

Prayer is a powerful thing, if we commit to it, lifting up to God every soul, rotten politicians included. By learning to see everyone around us in light of God’s desire that all shall be saved—saying to ourselves, “Yes, Jesus died for him too”—by this, we will become vessels for God’s grace, and will show the broken and divided world a graced and God-healed way of life. And is this not what the world needs more than anything else? Amen.