



A Challenge

Psalm 79:1-9 & 1 Timothy 2:1-7
Pentecost 15 - September 18, 2022
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Jesus rather famously told his followers that they ought to pray for their enemies. He actually said that we are called to love our enemies. Here's what he said in the Sermon on the Mount:

But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ...

Now that is quite a challenge that I daresay most of us would be perplexed by at best and less than willing at worst. We don't ordinarily think about praying for those whom we might be tempted to throw into a category as vicious and broad as 'our enemies.' But this is why scripture is scripture and why it has remained so central to our belief and our faith ... it challenges us and it challenges our everyday, normal comprehension about how life is supposed to be. We don't find a lot of encouragement to pray for our enemies anyway else in this life except in the scriptures.

However, if we listen closely to the admonitions of Paul in this First Letter to Timothy, we find that Christians are not called to do what is normal or what just seems natural. We are called to go above and beyond the normal and the natural to broaden our vision and our concern in prayer from those who are closest to us to be more inclusive ... in short, to pray for all people, enemies and all others included.

Paul is serious about this admonition that he makes to his pupil in the faith, Timothy. He carefully instructs Timothy to broaden his view a bit – to be conscious of others in this world and not just those who occupy his daily dealings and action. Paul does this, I am convinced, because Paul is persuaded that this is the very will of God – that this is the calling for all Christians in their efforts to be faithful and follow the leading of God's Spirit in their own lives.

In the next few verses of this text Paul makes it clear that it is God's desire that all people should be saved, should realize what God has done in Jesus Christ and should turn to God with gratitude and thanksgiving.

Stephanie Mar Smith, a religion professor, says as much in a commentary on the text:

... Paul explains that Timothy should pray for everyone so that he might mirror God's own desire for humankind.

When our vision is broadened a bit beyond just those who are close to us to include others, in fact, to include all people, we are then imitating exactly what is at the very heart of God – a care and concern for all people.

William Matthews, a Presbyterian pastor, adds this:

... everyone for whom we pray is worthy of God's help and blessing and, likewise, our prayers for them are decidedly worth our breath.

This can be a challenge to us, however, for we are parochial in so many ways. We like to divide up the world between those whom we love and know and those whom we do not know and may not love. We are tempted, as we live in this world, to accept the ways of the world as the real way to live, to fence off others who disagree with us or present themselves to us in ways that are somehow less-than-

appealing to us. We fall into the trap of narrowing our vision of this world and humankind rather than living with a broader view of our brothers and sisters on this planet.

Jane Anne Ferguson, a United Church in Christ minister, has written about how this call from Paul should affect our vision of God as well. Here's what she wrote:

This God is more challenging than the reassuring, safe, shoulder-to-cry-on God [folks] come seeking each Sunday. This God stretches us beyond our comfort zones and calls us to love in surprising situations.

This God calls conservative evangelicals to pray for their liberal brothers and sisters and vice versa! Democrats in our congregations are called to pray for Republicans! Those who are upset about change in the church they have loved and served for years are called to pray for those who find the new pastor's leadership cutting edge and prophetic. Those who are champing at the bit to sell the church building and move to a new location are called to pray for those who do not think it prudent even to initiate building campaign at this time! Not only are those people called to pray for one another, but their prayers will hopefully lead them, as [an early Church Father] noted, to love one another.

Rev. Ferguson gets at a truth here that we dare not forget – that prayer is not so much about changing God or forming God to our bidding, but rather about being formed ourselves by the very act, the very discipline of offering ourselves to God in prayer. Can you imagine what our vision in our everyday life would be like if we continually and consistently prayed not just for those who are near and dear to us, but for all people? Can you envision just how our own personal vision would be broaden if we did exactly as Paul calls Timothy (and consequently, all Christians) to do and remember all people in our thoughts and prayers? Why it would be nothing short of revolutionary and life changing.

If this were the case, no longer could we merely write-off this or that person because of their political leanings, because of their religious affiliations, because of their nationality, their gender, their sexual orientation, their profession, their age, their immigrant status, the perceived size of their bank account or lack therefor or any other thing that we might choose to divide us from others. No, in calling Timothy and all Christians to pray for others, Paul is calling us to broaden our vision so that we might see others as even God sees them.

Praying for all people and not just those people whom we consider “in” our group (whatever group that might be), helps us keenly to be focused upon the very purposes of God in this world, just as the lines from that great hymn by Harry Emerson Fosdick, “God of Grace and God of Glory,” does:

Cure thy children's warring madness; bend our pride to thy control; shame our wanton, selfish gladness, rich in things and poor in soul. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, lest we miss thy kingdom's goal.

When we take seriously the call that Paul places before us here, no longer can we afford to be less than caring and compassionate to all people. No longer can we comfort ourselves by playing the game of determining who is and who is not worthy of God's love or our solicitude. No longer can we believe the lie that we have nothing to do with others who may look differently, act differently, think differently, live differently than we do. No longer can we afford to be anything less than truly Christian, truly generous, truly compassionate and truly convinced that God calls us always to pray ... to pray for those near and dear to us AND to pray for all people. For indeed, what God has done in Christ Jesus, he has not done just for you or for me ... but for all. Thanks be to God!