

Many Ways to Pray

1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

September 23, 2007; Tim Devine

St. Paul's United Church of Christ; Seattle, Washington

*“Dear Timothy,
Pray every way you know how.
Pray for everyone.
Love, from your friend,
Paul”*

If only it were all so simple! The letters from Paul to Timothy that are a part of the New Testament Christian Scriptures have a lot going on in them. Part of the reality of that snapshot in time was that there had been a great expectation of Jesus' physical return to earth among these early Christians. But, as the years turned into decades of waiting, amidst a growing experience of persecution from the Roman authorities and expulsion by the leaders of the Jewish synagogues, there was a growing realization that this return, or “second coming” as we hear in today's language, was not going to be imminent.

So, there was a great deal of tension, if not a re-examining of core belief. As all of us know, it is not easy to have to change course in mid stride. In a significant way, at the time of these letters, the early church had to find ways of living differently into the world. It had to change its focus from looking at the sky and waiting to be rescued, into looking directly at the world and being a part of it all.

And that is a dilemma that has continued to be a part of Christian life and practice ever since. Too often we have thought about or experienced these issues in either/or ways. Prayer versus action. Discipleship versus self-care. Spirituality versus religion. Faith versus politics. My way or the highway.

But back at the time of these letters, leaders like Paul wrote letters of teaching, explaining their understanding of Jesus' identity and meaning. They also wrote letters of direction and encouragement and for these new and often struggling churches.

Paul and Timothy had worked together and traveled together on several of Paul's journeys. Scholars disagree on the timing of this writing, and they may in fact date to a time later than the life of Paul. But, no matter when the letters were written or who the author, they reflect Paul's teaching and they pass this on to any younger leader.

Timothy became a leader of the Christian community at Ephesus, a port city on the Aegean Sea in present-day Turkey. The author of the letter is worried about that particular church being won over by “false teaching.”

False teaching. I've often wondered just what that might be, or what that phrase really could mean. Our church school curriculum, Seasons of the Spirit, has a wonderful suggestion about false teaching, with some possible present-day examples. Listen to the following possibilities and see what you think:

Financial Advisor:

If you want peace of mind, come and follow me.

I will save you from the stock market crash.

Give me your bonds, and I will give you peace of mind:

a financial security that will protect you from the ups and downs of the economy.

Trust me. I'm your financial advisor.

Politician:

If you want world peace, come and follow me.

I promise to boost national security, invest more in defense, and increase the arms budget.

Give me your vote and I will promise peace:

a peace that will protect you from all terrorism, conflict, and war.

Trust me. I'm your local politician.

Minister:

If you want peace, come and follow me.

I know all about peace, I can spell peace in three languages: Greek, Hebrew, and English.

If you follow my religion it will save you from any worry or anxiety.

I will pray on your behalf and save you from anything that will trouble your life.

Trust me. I work for the church.

Personal Trainer:

If you want peace, come and follow me.

I will help you be at peace with your looks, your shape, your self.

Give me your effort and I promise a workout routine that will have you trim in three weeks, and a peace where you know you have done everything you can to help yourself.

Trust me. I'm your personal trainer.

Jesus:

If you want peace, come and follow me.

I do not promise an easy journey,

I do not promise contentment,

I do not promise satisfaction.

I promise a life that never tires for justice,

a way of living that never gives up on truth,

a peace that is the absence of nothing but the building of God's realm.

Come with me. I am the one of the cross.

During the Children's Time we talked about different times to pray – for example when we are thankful, when we are worried, or when we are sorry. And we also pray when we are scared and we want life to be easy and treat prayer like a giant Christmas present list.

That is what I hear behind the promises of the financial advisor, the politician, the minister, and the personal trainer. They are promising an easy life without suffering, although the personal trainer mantra of “no pain, no gain” might challenge this a bit. But the overall picture is the same in that they are promising happiness to a people who at some level are finding that they are empty and unfulfilled.

Even the author of the letter to Timothy may have fallen into that trap a bit when we hear in today’s passage: “*so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.*” Some are upset with this passage because it asks Timothy to pray “*for kings and all who are in high positions.*” It is hard to pray for corrupt leaders today, but back then it was praying for those who were persecuting the early listeners to this letter. Jesus admonishes us to pray for our enemies. And, if we don’t pray for them, how do we expect them to change?

“*A quiet and peaceable life*” feels like praying for peace and quiet, as opposed to peace and justice. A surface reading may feel that this passage is blessing civil leadership, whether it deserves it or not. But that assessment comes from a great distance away, and for most of us, a greater place of safety. Maybe the prayers are less about the corrupt leaders and more about simply the need of those early, besieged Christians for some breathing space, some peace and quiet in which to go about their business.

If there are no messengers, there will be no message.

And prayers are often far more than a simple “please help.” They can acknowledge the complexities and ambiguities and shadows of life, often in simple ways. One prayer that does this is sung here each week. But rather than hearing the familiar melody, listen again to the familiar words:

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

There is no promise of eternal happiness, financial security, protection from war, being saved from troubles, or personal health and security.

No, the prayer, attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, does quite the opposite:

*“God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.
Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time,
accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it,
trusting that You will make all things right, if I surrender to Your will,
so that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
and supremely happy with You forever in the next.
Amen.”*

There are many ways to pray, and many spiritual practices that can serve as a prayer.

One key for us is in getting outside of ourselves, our fears, and our needs that we can understand that there are no guarantees, but rather the promise of accompaniment and belonging. Hear again the curriculum's words that might come from Jesus:

*If you want peace, come and follow me.
I do not promise an easy journey,
I do not promise contentment,
I do not promise satisfaction.
I promise a life that never tires for justice,
a way of living that never gives up on truth,
a peace that is the absence of nothing but the building of God's realm.
Come with me. I am the one of the cross.*

There is no promise of eternal happiness, financial security, protection from war, being saved from troubles, or personal health and security.

There is a promise of a God – one God – who loves each of us fiercely and by name, and who doesn't want to lose any of us (as in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin), and who grieves with us when we suffer.

It is not often a life of peace and quiet, but more often a life a peace searching and struggling for justice.

It is not a peace that comes from a particular financial advisor, politician, minister, or personal trainer, but the peace that comes from groundedness and centeredness, as in the peace spoken of in the ancient Scottish prayer for peace:

*Deep peace of the running wave to you,
Deep peace of the flowing air to you,
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you,
Deep peace of the shining stars to you,
Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you, forever.*

Shalom. Salaam. Peace.

Amen.

1 Timothy 2:1-7

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all – this was attested at the right time. For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

Luke 16:1-13

Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”