

**September 29, 2013**

**Pastoral Prayer**

Lord of all, you have taught us the precious value of little things – a note from a friend, a hummingbird outside the window, a baby’s giggle, a tear, a splash of rain on a drought-browned lawn, a last breath, a hand slipped lovingly into another, the astonishingly simple words “I do,” and sunrise. For all the tiny “Bethlehems” in which you are born in our midst we give you thanks, for the signs that you are yet among us still.

We are grateful for the joys that ring like tambourines through our days – the visits of family and anniversary memories...

You are easy to see amidst the laughter and warmth, the celebrations and the smiles. But we would know you, as well, in the darker moments of our days.

We pray for the flooding victims in Colorado, the victims of terrorism in Kenya, the victims of civil war in Egypt and Syria, victims of grief; victims of disease and disability; victims of dishonesty or disloyalty, breach of trust, or self-indulgence. You are harder to see in the murkiness of pain, but here, in the security of these moments, trust that you are no less real.

Forgive us, O God, when we ignore or, because preoccupied, simply overlook you. Forgive us when we knowingly disappoint you, but no less when we clumsily bruise you, when we should have known better. And we give you thanks for the confidence that you continually reach out to heal the wounds between us.

In our better moments we reach out and touch you in the blessing of those around us, and in familiar words of comfort and courage and confidence. Here us, then, as together we pray as we have been taught: Our father in heaven...

**Text: 1 Timothy 2:1–7**

*First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings 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.*

## Public Prayers

You may or may not be familiar with Kinky Friedman -- humorist, musician, author, entrepreneur, and several-time candidate for Governor of Texas. In one of his gubernatorial campaigns Friedman had as a campaign slogan, "I can't mess it up any worse than it already is." It was funny -- and perhaps even carried some measure of truth -- but I don't know that it was the most inspiring message of confidence-building on behalf of a discerning electorate. Wouldn't we, after all, really prefer leaders with higher aspirational goals than that? More than just not wanting them to make things worse, don't we want leaders to...well...lead -- to think and act and choose with our collective best intentions at heart?

Apparently not. Apparently, if our political behavior is any reliable measure, what we are most interested in is having leaders who simply wear the colors of our partisan persuasion. That was one of the sobering observations that author Bill Bishop and his co-author Robert Cushing make in their book published a few years back called *The Big Sort*. According to Bishop -- a notable journalist -- and Cushing -- a sociologist at

the University of Texas -- Americans have been sorting themselves, over the past 45 years, into communities of like-mindedness. Literally. By states, zip codes, neighborhoods and groups of involvement, enabling us to hang out with only those who share our opinions.

Once upon a time, Bishop noted, political leaders and churches saw themselves as working for change – nurturing and nudging their constituents toward a better life and better way of living. Then they figured out that they could be more successful simply reinforcing and reflecting back the values and attitudes their people already embraced. And, of course, being “successful” was imminently more important than being useful. Don’t open a window; just hold up a mirror, because people basically just want to look at themselves.

The idea of change – of aspiring to and reaching for and encouraging others toward something nobler, something better; maybe even something divine – was discarded in favor of simple triumph. Winning. “Dialogue” – honest discussion – is a dying art, at least in part because dialogue assumes the presence and interplay of real ideas; having none, the most we can bring to the table is turfism and an inflexible point of view that we try to bully into the majority.

Perhaps this is just rank, revisionist nostalgia, but I swear there used to be a time when “our” leaders were “our” leaders; whether or not we had voted for them, once the election was over we closed ranks and got behind whoever had received the most votes. Now we largely bide our time.

With a family not long ago at the new Veteran’s Cemetery near Van Meter, finishing up burial arrangements for a loved one, the representative there was ticking off the list of options and benefits available to the family; one of which was a letter of gratitude and commendation signed by the President. Without missing much of a beat she assured the family that there wasn’t any hurry – that if they didn’t want their letter signed by **this** President, they could wait until a **new** one was inaugurated and get him or her to sign the letter they had coming. So much for any concept of **our** President of these **United** States. We just exempt ourselves until the next election cycle.

Enter the Apostle Paul and his audacious instruction to Timothy that he encourage “*supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, <sup>2</sup>for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and*

*dignity.”*

Now, there is a challenge radical in both its specificity and its inclusivity. I mean, it's bad enough that Paul thinks I ought to pray for leaders that I don't like – who don't share my political persuasion. After all, conventional wisdom suggests that I should be doing everything I can to subvert their effectiveness; make them look bad; show them in as unflattering a light as possible so as to undermine their prospects for re-election. How is “praying for them” supposed to serve that end? The answer, of course, is that it might serve an even higher end by making those leaders more effective and me more supportive. Undermining the effectiveness of those who are steering the ship might feel strategic in the short run, but it is lunacy in the long. How smart can it possibly be, after all, to work to maximize the oafishness of someone who holds your well-being in his or her political hands? It certainly may well be true that I want them out of that position as quickly as possible, but while they are in it it certainly seems best for all of us that they do the best job they are capable of doing.

John Chrysostom, one of the early church fathers writing just a few generations after Paul, observed that, “No one can feel hatred towards

those for whom he prays.” Paul, I think, had a sense that we would likely fare far better if we surrounded and undergirded those serving on our behalf with prayerful encouragement, rather than simply hiding or propping up our partisan favorites no matter how incompetent. “Pray for them,” Paul counsels Timothy, and urges him to teach his congregations.

It reminds me of the African-American church I preached in several years ago. You know how in black churches the people feel a responsibility to participate in the sermon – injecting an “amen!” from time to time, and a “well?” every now and then; and in my case more than few urgent “Help him, Jesus!” What if we participated in public life the way black churches participate in worship – with our own prayers of encouragement and pleas for Jesus’ help? Honestly seeking on our leaders’ behalf God’s blessing “*so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.*” It’s in our interest, after all, for them to be at their best.

But if praying for leaders isn’t hard enough, the rest of Paul’s admonition feels like an even bigger stretch. He wasn’t encouraging, after all, prayers for leaders, alone. While he pointedly calls attention to that select group, it occurs while urging that “*supplications, prayers,*

*intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone...*” Oh, man; he’s got to be kidding! My prayer list is already pretty crowded as it is – with people that I like. How am I supposed to fit in all these people I neither like nor respect, or with whom I adamantly disagree?

I’m not exactly sure how Paul might answer that question – except to suspect that he’s not much concerned with the element of agreement. We are, he understood, when it comes down to it, responsible for one another, and accountable to the God who, according to the children’s song, holds them “precious in his sight.”

This notion of “collective responsibility” isn’t, after all, a foreign concept. At civic events, from time to time, at a certain signal, attendees stand up a little straighter, place a hand over their heart, and pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, words that conclude with a determination to insure “liberty and justice for *all*.” Though that last word has gotten short shrift at various points in our collective history -- with national practice not always living up to our patriotic pledge -- it is an important thread woven throughout our little democratic experiment here on this land from sea to shining sea. “**All**.” The value and voice of even the most ordinary citizen – without exception, without exclusion, and

without prejudice. There is no fine print – no qualifying asterisk. Our intent is just as bold as it sounds: that **ALL** people should have equal access to the blessings of this land.

We foreshadowed that fundamental ethic in the *Declaration of Independence* that launched us on our way: the self-evident truth we held that “**all** people are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, such as Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

And church folk ought to feel right at home in that conversation, as well, since “all-ness” is as much a central element in the work of discipleship as it is in our citizenship. John's gospel reminds us that it was because of God's love for the **WORLD** that Jesus came – “not that the world might be condemned, but that the world might be saved.” The “world” is a pretty inclusive term. And here Paul instructs Timothy to teach the faithful to pray for everyone.

All this strikes me as being the most expansive dimension of our call to be stewards of God's blessing and all that God would touch with it – a sharing in the mediational work of Christ to which Paul calls attention; bridging the brokenness that separates people from each other and from



the God who loves them.

And so we offer our prayers for this deeply flawed but wonderfully potent public – for our leaders, not merely that they keep from messing things up even further, but that they discern the wisdom to guide us rightly and well toward a common life that is yet better, not just for some, but for all. And while we are at it, we just keep on praying, for the list goes on and on and includes not merely our little circle of like-mindedness, but all those for whom Christ died:

- The immigrants in our midst
- The rich as well as the poor
- The partisans on the opposite side of the aisle
- The fervently –but differently – religious.
- Democrats who wasted as much time chasing after the prior

President's National Guard service record as Republicans have wasted on the current President's birth certificate, when whoever is in that office could simply use our earnest prayers.

This isn't about "niceness." We can disagree – even stridently; we can argue and debate, but we don't have to slash and burn. Because we simply won't get very far with all this determined separation and

condemnation. We don't have the privilege of simply getting rid of each other, nor bending everyone to our will. The planet is not big enough for each of us to live in our own private worlds. We need each other to be at our best, and to bring the best that each of us has to give.

So let's stop yelling, stop belittling, stop poisoning the public square with our little parties of rabid discontent...

...and start praying for one another – not that they will see the light and start being just like me – but they will reach to become the best that God intends them to be.