

“On Politics and Prayer”

1 Timothy 2:1-7

September 22, 2019

Clinton G. Roberts

First Presbyterian Church

Lake Forest, Illinois

Our text for this morning moves from Paul’s gratitude for mercy, the topic of last week’s sermon, to an urgent call to prayer. The author writes, “First of all, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for everyone...” which, as Jesus taught, includes even our enemies. The text continues, “for kings and all who are in high places...” and then, the reason for which we pray for these people: “that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.” These virtues certainly describe our Amish neighbors, particularly those who have recently emigrated to central Wisconsin...

\*When I ride my bike along the back roads of Green Lake and Marquette Counties...very quiet! And not only peaceable, but pacifist, extremely dignified, and certainly people who practice being “Godly.” (you will remember how, after the mass shooting of children in the Amish Schoolhouse in Lancaster Co. in 2006, the Elders visited the mother of the shooter that very same day to give her and her family their forgiveness?) That’s godliness at the highest level, isn’t it?

But what about the rest of us? Presbyterians are people who are passionately engaged in the life of the world, people who embrace the

world with all its complexity and can be found serving in positions of power and leadership in business and professional life, academics, the military, and not least importantly, in the political life of our nation. John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister, was the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence, and more U.S. Presidents have identified themselves as Presbyterian than any other denomination.

I don't know how quiet we are... but can we Presbyterians really be as godly as the Amish? Can these words from 1 Timothy 2 apply to us? Vv. 3-4 of our passage provide us with an answer: "This is right and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved (no exceptions!) and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

## II

At the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD, when we believe these Pastoral Letters were written, the second generation of Christians were under increasing pressure in the Roman world. Biblical scholar and historian Eusebius of Caesarea, writing at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, states that both Christians and Jews were being "heavily persecuted" by the Emperor Domitian, who ruled from 81-96 AD before being assassinated by his own court officials. These were tough times for the church, which may be why the author urges believers to be both "quiet" and "peaceable." Paul wasn't

particularly either of those things—but at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, things had gotten grimmer.

Today in our own nation, the work and witness of the church has gotten grimmer, too—for different reasons. Today, we are living through a time of increasing disquiet and indignities, driven by the polarization of our political life, our growing economic disparity, racial injustice, cultural conflict, gun violence, and the debate over climate change. Respecting gun violence, more and more Americans are saying, “We don’t want your prayers...we want you to take action!” on common-sense legislation that could save even one human life.

People are angry and mistrustful about these issues—and angry people will find it difficult to pray for people they vehemently disagree with or find personally offensive. Yet this, in my opinion, makes this urgent call to prayer not less relevant—but more.

### III

The key to perceiving the relationship of politics to prayer lies, I believe, in a true understanding of what it means to be “godly.” Most of us, when we think about that, use terms like “pious,” “devout,” “holy,” or “religious”—words that all too easily morph into negative adjectives like “sanctimonious,” “moralistic,” “holier-than-thou,” and “fanatical.” Today

in America, many people are describing the church in precisely these terms. But is that really who we are? The answer can be found through a right understanding of what it means to be “godly,” and the actions our godliness calls us to embrace.

1) The word for “godliness” is “eusebia” in the Greek (from which we get the name Eusebius!). It means “piety” and author and commentator Jerry Bridges believes that godliness at its heart isn’t about being morally pure or super-religious at all: it’s about living your life with God...like the figure of Enoch in the Old Testament, who we are told in Genesis 5 “walked with God” and pleased God. Even more vividly, David himself, despite his many sins and shortcomings, is revered above all other kings of Israel as “a man after God’s own heart.” Bridges argues that godliness means simply “a devotion to God,” like the devotion of Mary Magdalene to Jesus. After he healed her affliction, she devoted herself to his teaching, leaving her home in Galilee to join the Company of the Disciples, caring for them with her time and her money, and following Jesus all the way to the Cross. Mary Magdalene is the only follower of Jesus who is mentioned in all four Gospels to be near the Cross and at the Tomb on the Day of Resurrection. Her devotion to Jesus epitomizes what it means to be godly.

2) William Law writes in his 18<sup>th</sup> Century classic, “A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life:”

“Devotion signifies a life given to God. The godly person lives no longer to his own will, or to the ways and the spirit of the world, but to the sole will of God; who considers God in everything, who serves God in everything, who makes all the parts of his common life parts of piety.” 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy makes its abundantly clear that the first, the foremost and the most important action arising from our devotion to God is to pray for all people—especially those in high places.

Last week, you were asked in worship to write down your prayers for this church and congregation as I began my ministry among you. Your response has been overwhelming, and, as I have working through them, your prayers have filled me to overflowing with gratitude, thanksgiving, humility and hope.

My point is this: if you believe, as I do, that these prayers are already being answered, can you not believe our prayers for our political leaders will be heard and answered as well? What kind of prayers would we offer? Would we not pray for God’s justice, mercy and love to prevail? For God’s guidance toward the truth? Would we not pray for moral discernment from our leaders—for courage, patience and wisdom? Would we not pray for our leaders to take thought for

ALL God's people living in our nation—and for America's pursuit of peace and prosperity throughout the world?

Of course we would...and today, we would add to these prayers our supplication for a spirit of unity and true bipartisanship that could lift us up again as “one nation under God.” I pray it may be so. And I know that you do, too.

### Conclusion

Do you think that just one prayer can make a difference?

I leave you with the story of William Tyndale, a great biblical scholar and a truly godly man who lived during the time of the Reformation. Growing up in England, William was inspired by people like Erasmus and Martin Luther to translate the Old and New Testaments from their original Hebrew and Greek into English, in order that common people might read and understand Scripture. At the time, this kind of activity was extremely dangerous because the Church had declared that translating the scriptures into the vernacular was heretical.

When Henry VIII divorced his wife Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Ann Boleyn, William Tyndale publically remonstrated with the king and was forced to leave England for Brussels. There, he was betrayed into the hands of the Hapbburgs and convicted of heresy.

As he awaited his execution at the stake, William spoke this prayer in a loud, fervent voice. It may be the most famous prayer ever said for a political leader:

“Lord!” he said. “Open the King of England’s eyes.”

Was his prayer answered? You be the judge.

One year later, in 1536, King Henry VIII authorized the publication of Tyndale’s English translation of the Bible. It was called “the Matthew Bible” and it forms in large part the text of the King James Bible, published in 1611. And without that Bible, can we really understand the subsequent history of the English-speaking peoples? The Declaration of Independence? Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address? The “I Have a Dream” speech of Dr. Martin Luther King?

When it comes to politics and prayer, let’s put our devotion to God into action—and never underestimate the power of this prayer:

“Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

AMEN