

“You want me to pray for whom?” - A sermon by Lee Ireland
Community Presbyterian Church Cathedral City
September 22, 2019 Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
1 Timothy 2:1-7

Prayer: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

What would it be like for Paul and Timothy to live in the first century Roman Empire? The inhabitants in the area where Timothy ministered were quite diverse. Because of migration, that may have been caused by war or for economic reasons, these Christ-followers lived in a society with people from all parts of the known world. This created a culture with a wide ethnic and religious mix. This migration also created a culture where many different gods were worshipped because the people brought their gods with them when they immigrated. Government-wise, the Roman empire had evolved from a republic to a government ruled by an emperor. With the death of Julius Caesar, the emperor was worshipped as a god.

Christ-followers themselves were also diverse, not only ethnically, but also economically. In their home churches there were homeowners mixed with day laborers and slaves. As followers of Christ, they knew they were a minority and were aware of their different lifestyle. Their values were countercultural. They practiced sexual restraint and marital fidelity and believed in only one God in a culture that worshipped many gods. They realized their way of living left them in a precarious position, outside the mainstream of society.

Compare our society in this country to the one I just described. We live in a society with immigrants: migration that may have been caused by war or by economic reasons. The USA is full of immigrants, not just those from Central America. People migrate to the USA from countries all over the world. In Southern California, we live in a society with a wide ethnic and religious mix. Immigrants bring their religious practices with them. As in Paul's day, there are many gods being worshipped in our society.

We may not have an emperor to worship, but we have plenty of celebrities and media stars some people treat as gods. Their fans follow more closely the lifestyle and actions of these celebrities and media stars than many Christians follow Jesus and live as Jesus commanded. Often our political leaders become gods to some folks as well.

Today's Christ-followers are also diverse, not only ethnically, but also economically. Maybe not in every church, but in many churches there's a mixture of homeowners and blue-collar workers, professionals, laborers – and thank God, no slaves. However, many Christ-followers may just be existing, working for what is often called slave wages.

As followers of Christ, many of us know that we are in a minority in our society not only because of our numbers, but also because of our values are countercultural. The Bible asks us to practice sexual restraint and marital fidelity and to make God number one in our lives. Some Christ-followers' lifestyles puts them in a precarious position in their work life and social lives. Their beliefs are outside the mainstream of society.

As Christ-followers today we live in a society with the same temptations and issues that these early Christ-followers faced. The advice that Paul gives to Timothy is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago.

Let me read the beginning of the scripture lesson again. **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.**

Pray for those in high positions – especially in the government? Now, I know that some of you would prefer, and prefer is probably not a strong enough word, some of you would prefer not to pray for those who are in high positions. That would mean that you'd be praying for a president, a governor, senators, a city mayor you may not like. Maybe some of you question if you want to be a Christian if that's what you are called to do!

Why are we called to pray for people we don't like? It goes back to inclusivity, those words: **for everyone**. No one is excluded from God's love in Jesus Christ. All are deserving of our prayers. Why? As Paul wrote **Christ Jesus, himself human, [who] gave himself a ransom for all**. Christ died so that all people, everyone, can be saved. Christ died so our enemies can know the truth. Christ died so that the poor and the wealthy, the homeless, gay, immigrants, the addicted, the disabled can be saved. As Paul put it, **God our Savior desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.**

Everyone. Yes, everyone, even those we don't like or can barely tolerate. The early Christ-followers may not have liked the leaders who influenced the people in the society in which they lived, but they prayed for the leaders in contrast to those in that society who prayed to the leaders who were considered gods.

Last Sunday we talked about God's grace and Paul's response to it. Paul responded by serving God, making his life's work spreading the good news about Jesus' life, death and resurrection. I asked you last week to consider how you respond to God's generous grace. How do you serve?

In this week's scripture lesson, Paul continues explaining God's grace – with a different tact. Paul again explains that God's grace is for everyone. God **desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.**

These verses from a letter from Paul to Timothy are as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago. We don't know the reaction of those in Paul's day who read this letter and how it influenced them. What's important is your reaction to this scripture today and how it influences you.. How are you responding to God's grace? Are you following Paul's teaching and praying for everyone? Do you believe that God wants everyone, even those you don't like, **to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth**? I hope so!

My question to you this week. What are you doing to see that everyone knows God **desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth**? Think about that this coming week and let tell me what you're doing.

May God bless your every effort.