

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
“Prayer for Everyone”  
Thomas G. Speers, III  
Ordinary 25—September 22, 2019

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

“The first thing I want you to do is pray. Pray every way you know how, for everyone you know.” So says Gene Peterson in his translation of our passage from Timothy today. Pray for everyone.

One of the things I particularly appreciate about this congregation is your attention to prayer. You really do pray for each other. One of the committees of the church is focused on mission and prayer. We set aside a whole page in the Sunday bulletin for prayers and a number of you are part of our prayer group that prays for people in special need. Some of you are prayer partners with women from Guatemala. Prayer is a central part of this congregation.

And prayer is not limited to our circle of believers; it extends to all people, because God’s salvation extends to all people. So we pray for the youngest and the oldest, the people who are here on a regular basis and those who have not darkened the doorway of a church. So we pray for ourselves and for people in all corners of the earth. We pray for everyone, because God desires that everyone might be saved and come to know God’s truth.

So we pray for those we don’t really like, although sometimes this practice has involved hoping that they might come around to our point of view. Sometimes there isn’t very much difference between our prayer lists and our lists of difficult people, people we would just as soon disappeared or left us alone. Yet what we are being asked to do is to pray that others might come to know God’s truth, which is not the same thing as our truth. We are called to pray that everyone might come to know the wisdom, the mercy, the guidance, the presence of God in their own lives. Don’t just pray that they will be the way we want them to be; pray that they will be the way God wants them to be. Pray for everyone.

So we pray for enemies, something that is not easy to do, especially at a time when some of our best and bravest are right now living in the midst of grave danger. Yet this is our calling as citizens of God’s realm before being citizens of any one nation. It was Desmond Tutu who said some years ago, “God’s love is too great to be confined to any one side of a conflict or to any one religion. ...God says, ‘All are my children.’ It is shocking. It is radical. But it is true.”<sup>1</sup> It isn’t easy to pray for our enemies, but that is our calling. Jesus surely understood that when we pray for our enemies, it is much harder to hate them. When we really pray for others, we tend to see them in a new light. Pray for everyone.

And we pray for our leaders. I can remember my father saying that one of his professors in Edinburgh, Scotland, told his class that they ought to pray for the Queen every Sunday in worship. Following that advice, we pray regularly for our leaders, including our President and members of Congress as well as our leaders in Dover and in our own cities and towns. This is not a political issue. When we pray for our leaders, we might ask that God support a particular program we like, but much more we are asking God’s guidance and mercy, God’s wisdom and direction to take root in their lives and in their actions. Is there anything greater we could ask for? Pray for our leaders that they might be faithful.

When we visited with Desmond Tutu in South Africa several years ago, we heard a story about Archbishop Tutu visiting the leaders of South Africa because of his concerns about corruption, and

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<sup>1</sup> Desmond Tutu, interview with Dr. Frank Lipman, April 14, 2009.

he said: “Do you remember how we prayed the former government out of power? We could do that again!” Pray for our leaders.

Jan Karon has written a marvelous series about a fictional town called Mitford. The main character is an Episcopal priest named Father Tim and he often speaks of the prayer that never fails: “Thy will be done.” Pray that prayer when praying for our leaders. Pray that prayer when praying for anyone.

Of course, our prayer is not only for the good guys; prayer is for everyone, including those who have faltered, including those who have sinned, including those we consider enemies. It was Martin Luther King who once preached: “We must recognize that the evil deed of the enemy-neighbor, the thing that hurts, never quite expresses all that he is. An element of goodness may be found even in our worst enemy. Each of us is something of a schizophrenic personality, tragically divided against ourselves. A persistent civil war rages within all our lives. Something within us causes us to lament with Ovid, the Latin poet, ‘I see and approve the better things, but follow worse,’ or to agree with Plato that human personality is like a charioteer having two headstrong horses, each wanting to go in a different direction, or to repeat with the Apostle Paul, ‘The good that I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do.’”

“This simply means that there is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this we are less prone to hate our enemies.”<sup>2</sup> When we discover this we may find it easier to pray for everyone, recognizing that no one is beyond the reach of God’s redemptive love.

Luke’s gospel suggests that God’s favor reaches out even to dishonest managers. A rich man had a manager who was squandering the rich man’s wealth. When this was discovered the rich man demanded a full accounting and fired him. But before being let go, the manager endeared himself to various creditors by decreasing their bills, and for some reason, the rich man commends the manager for his shrewdness. Many have been offended by this parable. It doesn’t seem right to be praising dishonesty, especially in a time when there is more than enough dishonesty in our world. Yet, I’m not sure that dishonesty is what Jesus is praising here. Instead he finds something commendable in a person who has acted dishonestly. It is the same idea that was proclaimed by Dr. King: “There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us.” We all of us, like the dishonest manager, are a mixed bag of the commendable and the less commendable. What the parable seems to suggest is that we should use our money, and here, unlike some other passages in Scripture, money is considered unclean—we should use our money in such a way that we are welcomed into God’s eternal home when our money is no longer around or of any value. There are things money can’t buy: it can’t buy love and it can’t buy heaven. Professor Charles Cousar suggests that “instead of employing your money to create a group of people that owe you favors, make friends with your money. Friendship involves commonality and equality, not indebtedness.”<sup>3</sup> So this is the opposite of enslaving people in need. To make friends with our money is to put people on the same footing in God’s world. Money, frankly, is not worth very much when compared with the riches of God’s kingdom.

The parable remains difficult, with more questions than answers. The bankers and investment people in the church don’t usually care for this story. Yet, Luke puts the emphasis on the idea that although shrewd managers can be occasionally commended, still, “whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.” Professor Fred Craddock suggests that the thrust of this parable is that like the steward, we are to “use possessions so as to gain, not lose, one’s future...The life of a disciple is one of faithful attention to the frequent and familiar tasks of each day, however small or insignificant they may seem. The one faithful in today’s nickels and dimes is the one to be trusted with the big

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *On Loving Your Enemies in Strength to Love* © 1963, 1981.

<sup>3</sup> Charles B. Cousar, *Texts for Preaching: Year C* © 1994 Westminster John Knox Press.

account, but it is easy to be indifferent toward small obligations while quite sincerely believing oneself fully trustworthy in major matters. The realism of these sayings is simply that life consists of a series of seemingly small opportunities. Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with the queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely this week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a county commissioner, teach a Sunday School class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, feed the neighbor's cat. 'Whoever is faithful in a little is faithful also in much.'<sup>4</sup>

So God's favor goes out to include shrewd managers, yet alongside of that truth, is the fact that the way we live our lives does matter. The way we treat our friends and family and neighbors does matter. The way we care for the least and lost does matter. The way, and Luke puts special emphasis here, we spend our money has eternal consequences. Whoever is faithful in a little is faithful also in much.

"The first thing I want you to do is pray. Pray every way you know how, for everyone you know."<sup>5</sup> Pray for everyone because God desires that everyone might be saved. Pray for everyone, the honest and the dishonest, the faithful and the unfaithful, the commendable and the not so commendable, because of course that describes all of us. Yet also recognize that the way we live our lives does matter. Focus on being faithful with that which God has given you, that God may grant to us all the true riches. Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.

Let us pray: Help us O God, to expand our vision to see the world as you see it. Help us honestly to pray for all people, including our enemies, including those who are different, or difficult, including especially our leaders, that we might live lives that are acceptable in your sight. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Fred B. Craddock, Luke, Interpretation Series, © 1990 John Knox Press.

<sup>5</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, 1 Timothy 2:1, The Message, The Bible in Contemporary Language, NAV Press © 2002.