

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Robert Alexander
“Praying for Peace”
1 Timothy 2:1-7
18th Sunday after Pentecost
September 18, 2016

I have received plenty of advice over the years about being in ministry. When I hear something that sounds reasonable or receive a resource that is helpful I put it in my Ministry Tool belt. Focus on preaching and pastoral care. Take care of yourself, you are in this for the long haul. Don't neglect your family. Don't have a meeting if you don't have to have one. Nurture your love for Christ if you want to stay strong in the faith. Daily time with God is crucial.

Of course these are not all unique to ministry. Taking care of ourselves, our families, and our faith, are important in all aspects of life. But to be the Body of Christ in the world we need to pay attention to our calling and to our well-being.

The Apostle Paul, in writing to his young apprentice Timothy, gave him his own advice that would enable him, as he says, to “fight the good fight.” And he began with prayer. Prayer is the first tool that Paul recommends to Timothy.

I recently read the following quote about prayer. “Prayer – how to do nothing and still think you are helping.” It made me wonder exactly what we do hope to accomplish when we pray. There are plenty of scriptures that invite us to pray – just like 1 Timothy. We are invited to approach God with our supplications, petitions, thanksgiving, and praise. And our prayers, we assume, accomplish something. Some scriptures suggest that our prayers bring about God's activity in the world – 2 Chronicles 4:7 for example “if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” Or perhaps our prayers bring about change in someone else's life like when in the Book of Acts, Peter and John heal the man who had been paralyzed from birth enabling him to walk. Or perhaps our prayer brings about a change in our own hearts like when King Solomon prayed for Wisdom or King David prayed for strength or when the man came to Jesus and asked him to help him in his unbelief. The content of our prayers does matter and the condition of our hearts also matters.

There was once a little boy who had been sent to his room because he had broken some rules. After some time had passed he came out and said to his mother, "I've been thinking about what I did and so I said a prayer." "That's fine," she said, "if you ask God to make you good, He will help you." "Oh, I didn't ask Him to help me be good," replied the boy. "I asked Him to help you put up with me."

And maybe that isn't such a bad prayer but you see that the little boy had no intention of changing his ways. Sometimes before a prayer can become effective, I think our hearts have to be in the right place...and even then...the purpose of prayer is to invoke God to come and supply all of God's strength and wisdom and love and grace in a given situation. If we think that we can accomplish everything on our own steam, our own energy, our own effort, then perhaps we don't pray at all. Our prayers are an opportunity to remember that God does care about our lives, that God hears us, and that God will bring about change and new life according to the goodness of God's will and purpose.

Max Lucado once wrote that “Our prayers may be awkward. Our attempts may be feeble. But since the power of prayer is in the One who hears it and not in the one who says it, our prayers do make a difference.”ⁱ

So what kind of a difference did Paul hope for Timothy and the church in Ephesus to make through their prayers?

“Pray for everyone, for kings and all those in high position so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.”

“If 1 Timothy was indeed directed to the Christian community in Ephesus (as is implied in 1:3), this instruction would be particularly appropriate, because the imperial cult was especially strong in Ephesus. Christians faced a major dilemma: to what extent could they be involved in the culture and society to which they belonged without compromising their Christian faith?”ⁱⁱ The Imperial Cult deified the emperors and required that people bow and pray to the emperor who was said to be Lord and Savior. Paul makes it clear in 1 Timothy that there is only one God and that Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and humanity. Our prayers may be given **on behalf of** the emperor – but never are to be made **to** the emperor. As the church was persecuted for its beliefs and its practices it had to determine how to live at peace with neighbor and find ways to avoid persecution. The goal was a peace that was both internal and external. The words used suggest that the purpose of the prayers are to bring about the conditions under which the Christian could live with faithfulness and devotion to God with all reverence and dignity in all aspects of life. Praying for others was a way to demonstrate compassion and concern for those who did not know of God’s love and of the truth of the good news of the gospel. The text clearly states that it is God’s desire for all to come to this knowledge and for all to know the salvation of God.

As you may know, there are many different understandings of what it means for us to receive salvation. Some are focused on our eternal home in God’s heavenly dwelling. Others understand salvation as a here and now action which transforms the person in this world and gives them new life now. Elsewhere, Paul has written that we are to “work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.” (Phil. 2:12) This passage agrees with many others that our salvation is both an event and a process. The cross and the empty tomb are the events that open the possibility for transformation and new life that occurs throughout the journey of the disciple. And our transformation is ongoing as the Holy Spirit works in us to make us more like Jesus Christ. That God’s desire is for everyone to have this experience is a pretty amazing statement. What would it look like if we lived our lives in this way? What would it look like for the church to pray for others with this belief at the center of our prayers? If our hearts were softened toward our neighbor who is different from us, or toward our political leader who thinks differently from us, or toward our enemy who may wish to persecute or harm us, how would our actions toward them change? Would there be any greater possibility of peace in our lives? I think there would be.

Paul invited Timothy and the church to do what we have long proclaimed from this pulpit. Look at others through the eyes of Christ – the one who gave his life for the sake of the world. God’s desire is that all be saved and come to know the truth. So we are called to pray like it and to live like it!

“John Buchanon, former editor of the Christian Century, once wrote a tribute to the Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich. Buchanon admired Rostropovich’s courage. You see, in 1970 Rostropovich took a bold step to address what he considered an injustice. He expressed his support for artistic freedom and human rights in a letter that he wrote to *Pravda*, the state-run newspaper of the Soviet Union. In response, the Soviets stripped him and his wife of citizenship. Years later, it seems, John Buchanon saw Rostropovich play a Dvorak cello concerto in Chicago. As the last note faded, the audience sat mesmerized. Rostropovich did an extraordinary thing: he stood up and kissed his cello. The audience erupted. Then he hugged and kissed the surprised conductor. Then he hugged and kissed the entire cello section before moving on to the violins. He hugged and kissed most of the orchestra. What gratitude he had!

Reverend Matt Matthews, a SC pastor asks the question – “What if we prayed for others with Rostropovich’s story in mind?”ⁱⁱⁱ

If we prayed for others like that, he muses, then our prayer-grounded lives might better reflect the image of Christ. Our sometimes ashen-words of gratitude that we pray for others, even enemies, might

blossom into the lilt of song or the vital flash of action. Our norm of self-centeredness might melt into communal concern. Our penchant for self-reliance might give way to a true submission to the one who gave himself as a ransom for all.

Our prayers would invite us to see the places of injustice in the world where peace is lacking and would call us to action. That action would be on behalf of the oppressed and on behalf of the oppressor who also needs to come to salvation and the knowledge of the truth of God's love and grace for the world. In our prayers, then, we are invited to pray for those we love, and for those whom we cannot stand to be in the same room with. We are invited to pray for those in leadership with whom we agree and for those in leadership with whom we disagree. We are invited to pray for loved ones and for our enemies. And when our prayers are offered in the right spirit, our lives will be changed as we submit to the one who gave himself for the sake of the world!

Lib recently told me about a PRAYER APP that she downloaded on her smart phone called Ceaseless. This comes from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians when he teaches them to "pray without ceasing." The APP accesses a person's Contacts and randomly chooses three people from that list for whom you are to pray each day. I decided to give it a try. Now I don't know about you, but I have contacts for all sorts of people. Some I am close to and some I am not. Some I get along with very easily and some are more of a challenge. And so, as I have tried out this APP I have found it to be a wonderful way to keep before me the names of people that I need to be lifting up in prayer. And who knows, that prayer may lead me to write a text or an email or to make a phone call and to follow that with some action or some conversation that will contribute to the peace of the world.

I cannot say with any certainty what happens in the heavenly realm when I pray. I do believe that God hears and that somehow God answers but I know that the answer doesn't always come in the way that I want. I don't know for sure what happens in the heart of another person when I pray for them but I know how people respond when they know that I am praying for them and it always seems to be appreciated and it always seems to strengthen my relationship with that person. What I do know for certain is that when I pray – I mean really pray – seeking the will of God – delighting in the things of God – pursuing the way of Christ – that something changes in me.

When I intently pray for a person or a situation I find that God does something in my heart and I am more likely to get involved and to make my life a prayer of sorts. I have found this to be true as it relates to our Intercessory Prayer Group here at DCPC. You may have heard that this group is celebrating 20 years of constant weekly prayer. Every Wednesday morning at 11:30 people gather to lift up the prayers of the people. When I join them I find that I am more likely to reach out to someone with a note or to make a contribution to a cause, or to make a visit, or to share a meal with someone. Every week the doors are open to anyone who wants to come and pray in the parlor or simply to stop what they are doing wherever they are on Wednesdays at 11:30 a.m. and pray. This Wednesday in particular, all who have participated are invited to bring a bag lunch and to stay for a time of fellowship after the prayer time to celebrate 20 years of prayer.

There is something else going on this Wednesday that I want you to know about. **The International Day of Peace.** We have talked about praying for peace and I want to invite you to both pray and act toward a more peace-filled world – especially this Wednesday. The International Day of Peace began with a U.N. Resolution in 1981 and again in 2001 by the world's leaders to work towards peace in our time. This year the theme is "The Sustainable Development Goals: Building Blocks for Peace." The 17 Sustainable Development Goals were unanimously adopted by the 193 Member States of the United Nations at an historic summit of the world's leaders in New York in September 2015. The new ambitious 2030 agenda calls on countries to begin efforts to achieve these goals over the next 15 years. It aims to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all.

The Sustainable Development Goals are integral to achieving peace in our time, as development and peace are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

“The 17 Sustainable Development Goals are our shared vision of humanity and a social contract between the world's leaders and the people,” said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. “They are a to-do list for people and planet, and a blueprint for success.”^{iv}

I invite you to go online and learn more about the goals that have been set. But not only that – pray for our leaders to have the wisdom, the courage, the love and the integrity to do what they have said and to pursue the things that lead to peace in our world. Pray for them to know God’s amazing love and to come to a knowledge of God’s truth so that all may respond in faith and in faith-filled living. May our prayers for peace be offered both with love-filled words and with love-filled action.

To God be the Glory! Amen.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LU_QR_FTt3E (Rostropovich)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Osw1_0jMM4M (International Peace Day)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZjbzYi8d5U> (Promo Video – Waving Flag)

ⁱ Max Lucado quote,

ⁱⁱ Mitchell Reddish, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4 (WJK. Louisville, KY, 2010) p. 89.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Buchanan, “Bravo!” *Christian Century*, July 10, 2007.

^{iv} <http://www.un.org/en/events/peaceday/>