

One for All

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, September 18, 2022.

1 Timothy 2:1-7

In the New Testament, the two letters to Timothy and the one letter to Titus are known collectively as the Pastoral Letters because they are concerned with matters of pastoral leadership and oversight of churches. The three letters claim to be written by the apostle Paul, but most Biblical scholars believe that they were actually written by someone else, in the name of Paul, to give guidance to churches in the first part of the second century. Their vocabulary, content, and style differ enough from Paul's other letters that these scholars believe it is unlikely Paul wrote them himself.

The first letter to Timothy is written so that we "may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church." The letter contains instructions, which are to be passed on to the churches, to guide them in their congregational life – how they should treat one another and how they should go about selecting bishops and deacons, for example. These instructions begin with the passage read this morning.

As I read this passage over and over again during the past week, two words jumped out at me: "one" and "all." First, the scripture tells us that "there is one God" who is concerned for all, one God who "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." The Christian belief that there is only one God comes from our Jewish heritage. Jews also believe that there is only one God. The monotheistic essence of Judaism is encapsulated in a verse from the Torah known as the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." The *Shema* serves as the centerpiece of morning and evening Jewish prayer services. Jews consider it to be the most important part of their prayer services. Indeed, it is so central to Judaism that Jewish parents teach the *Shema* to their children before they go to sleep at night.

The one God whom Jews and Christians worship is the same God whom Muslims worship. This one God is the source of all that is, the Creator and Sustainer of the entire universe, of all creation. God is concerned for

all creation; God cares for all creatures -- great and small. God loves each and every one of us, no matter our nationality, our ethnicity, our race, no matter our economic condition or social status, no matter our gender identity or sexual orientation. And it is God's desire that all of us be saved – that all of us be healed and made whole, that all of us be restored to right relationship with God and with one another.

Second, the scripture tells us that there is “one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, . . . who gave himself [as] a ransom for all.” A mediator brings two or more conflicting parties together to resolve the conflict between them. Jesus Christ is the one who brings together God and humankind, the one who reconciles God and humanity. Human beings, held captive by sin and thereby separated from God, have been freed from sin by Jesus Christ, who with his life paid the ransom for all. Now, of course, this Christian belief is not shared by Jews or Muslims. Jews may acknowledge Jesus as a teacher and Muslims certainly venerate him as a prophet, but they do not see him as the “one mediator between God and humankind.”

Nevertheless, God offers salvation to all people. God's concern is for everyone – not just the righteous but sinners too, not only Jews but Gentiles as well. And so, we ought to have the same breadth of concern for others as God does, which is the third point I take away from this scripture passage. As Christians we are called to pray for all people. The letter to Timothy urges “that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone,” even, or especially, “for kings and all who are in high positions.” Now remember that in the second century, when this letter was probably written, Christians were a persecuted minority group living under Roman rule. So for Christians to include “kings and all who are in high positions” in their prayers, meant praying for their persecutors, praying for their enemies! And in so doing, it was their hope that they might “lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.”

Of course, political leaders today are in need of prayer just as much as they were centuries ago in the time of Timothy. Though given the deep divisions in our country, many of us may be more inclined to want to curse politicians than to pray for them. Love 'em or hate 'em, the fact of the matter is: our elected leaders make decisions that can have an enormous impact on people's lives – for good or for ill. We can pray for them to be mindful of the human consequences of their decisions. We can

pray for them to make wise decisions that advance the common good of all rather than the special interests of a few. Public officials carry huge responsibilities on their shoulders. Does anyone doubt that our state legislators and Governor Lujan Grisham are in need of prayer? Does anyone doubt that the U.S. Congress and President Biden are in need of prayer?

First Timothy exhorts us to pray for all people, even those we may despise. Progressive Christians are called to pray for their conservative evangelical sisters and brothers and vice versa. Democrats are called to pray for Republicans and Republicans for Democrats. We may change in the process. For as John Chrysostom, the notable Christian bishop and preacher from the fourth and fifth centuries, points out: "No one can feel hatred towards those for whom [one] prays."

Lutheran pastor and author Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it a little differently. She says: "I have to remember that God's love isn't just for me, it's for every jerk who ever hurt me." Those of you who participate in the Adult Christian education series on the Bible that Joe Woodworth will begin leading today will be hearing more from Nadia Bolz-Weber and other contemporary Christian thinkers.

To pray for all people "is right and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior." Christian concern should exclude no one. But too often it does exclude. When I'm on a road trip and the only radio stations I can hear feature evangelical Christian preachers, they make it sound like God only loves Christians, that only Christians are blessed, that only Christians go to heaven, and the rest of the world is damned to hell. To them I would say, with the Anglican clergyman J.B. Phillips: "Your God is Too Small." We cannot limit the grace of God.

Every time I hear Christians singing "God Bless America" I worry about their intention. Sometimes it sounds like they are asking God to bless America **to the exclusion** of other countries. Or perhaps they are asking God to bless America **more than** other countries of the world. I never hear "God Bless America" and think that the singers are really asking God to bless the whole world.

Even when Christians pray for the whole world, sometimes I wonder if there is an unstated assumption that we are really praying for the "Christian world" rather than the whole world. When we pray for the

whole world do we picture in our minds Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Baha'is, Jains, Sikhs, Taoists, Wiccans, Zoroastrians, atheists and agnostics, as well as Christians? We are all children of God, members of the one human family, no matter what our religious tradition.

As Christians we believe in one God who is concerned for all, one God who "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." We also believe that there is only "one mediator between God and humankind," namely Jesus Christ, who came to bring the whole world back into right relationship with God. Consequently, we Christians are also to be concerned for the whole world. We are called to pray for the well-being of all people. As such, if we can't fully embrace the differences between us and other people, at least we should be tolerant of them. In the contemporary controversies of our day, Christians ought to be voices of reason and reconciliation, of care and compassion, of tolerance and mutual understanding. May we do our best to see the world through God's eyes and to see ourselves as children of God, sisters and brothers, members of the one human family.

For "there's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea.
There's a kindness in God's justice, which is more than liberty.
There is no place where earth's sorrows are more felt than up in heaven.
There is no place where earth's failings have such kindly judgment given.
For the love of God is broader than the measures of the mind.
And the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind."

Let's rise and sing together, hymn #435 There's a Wideness in God's Mercy.