

On Politics and Being Politic

This is one of those lectionary readings that seems to pick up in the middle of one thought and end in the middle of another. I Timothy chapter two opens with the words, “First of all, then...” It is obvious that whatever Paul is about to say is somehow dependent on what has come before. A quick review of chapter one reminds us that the letter is meant as Paul’s reiteration of his directions to Timothy, who has stayed behind in Ephesus while Paul travels to Macedonia. Paul is concerned that certain teachers in the Ephesian church have lost their focus on the gospel taught by Paul and instead are, as he writes, “occupy(ing) themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith.” Paul goes on to remind Timothy of the core of the gospel as he has experienced it and taught it in the stirring passage which we heard last week. He then returns to his original subject in chapter one, verse eighteen: “I am giving you these instructions, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies made earlier about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight...”

Most of what follows in chapter two and, indeed, in chapters three through six, are specific instructions to Timothy on how to order the life of the Ephesian church. Most of these are not included in the Revised Common Lectionary, either because they relate to issues faced only occasionally by churches, such as the qualifications of pastors and deacons, or because they are so rooted in the mores and structures of First Century life as to have limited applicability to the Church as she has existed in the years since 1994, when the Revised Common Lectionary was released for widespread use. Today’s passage, however, deals with a subject that is always topical – the relationship of the Christian to secular authority – and it does so in a way that links to some of the most significant recurring themes of Paul’s writings. I want to take the time this morning to look at both the specific and the general themes in these few verses and also to look briefly at the reasons for the abrupt ending of this pericope according to the committee which devised the current lectionary. In this latter, I’ll be opening a can of worms I have neither the time nor the inclination to grapple with fully today but I can’t in good conscience simply dodge the issue as has been done with the ending of the suggested reading.

It may come as a surprise to some that Paul would send instructions to the Ephesian church through Timothy that the Christians should pray for kings and all in high position. Paul, after all, was in many ways a revolutionary. Through his continual teaching of the Lordship of Christ Jesus and of the unique holiness and majesty of God, Paul flew in the face of the standard Roman understanding of the divinity of the emperor and of the pantheon of gods imported from all over the empire to whom was due a certain amount of fealty. The failure of the Christians to fall in line with normal societal expectations of piety in these cases was well-known during Paul’s career and, indeed, had been used as an accusation against Paul himself. In the seventeenth chapter of Acts, we read the story of the mission of Paul and Silas in Thessalonica. As Luke tells the story, “When (the mob) could not find (Paul and Silas), they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, “These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.”” Christians and Jews alike were often accused of atheism for their failure to worship any God but their own and their obstinacy in this regard caused any number of problems, from their expulsion from Rome under Claudius Caesar to the destruction of Jerusalem by the army of Titus to the periodic persecutions of Christians until the time of Constantine. It simply was not possible to

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worship one God and proclaim Jesus as Lord without running afoul of the empire. Indeed, even Paul's seemingly pacific instruction to pray for the authorities has a revolutionary element. As Luke Timothy Johnson writes in his commentary on the two letters to Timothy, "Such prayer is actually subversive of any claim to ultimate authority on the part of human rulers, for it turns to a still higher power with the request to bless the king."

Paul's directions to Timothy and the Ephesians must be seen as a palliative measure aimed at preventing the wrath of Caesar from falling on the little community with such frequency that they would be utterly destroyed. We might think of it as being politic, avoiding offense when it can be avoided. In this, Paul was following the example of his master. As you may remember, the Pharisees and Herodians, strange bedfellows indeed, came to Jesus and said, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" "But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Nor were the Ephesians the only group to whom Paul gave this advice. In the Epistle to the Romans, Paul writes, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God... For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." Paul repeated the advice he gave to Timothy when he wrote at about the same time to Titus in Crete and the First General Epistle of Peter has a similar admonition of obedience to secular authority. Because the leaders of the early Church knew that their very existence was an affront to the secular authorities, they did what they could to guide their communities in leading a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.

There is more here, however, than the wisdom of keeping one's neck out of the noose. There is also the consideration that it is hard to convince others of the spiritual blessings of the Gospel if they are offended with you. Timothy was with Paul when he wrote to the Romans, so he would likely have been familiar with Paul's teaching to them on secular authority and also with his teachings about avoiding foods that some considered unclean. He wrote, "...resolve never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love... Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor." Although Paul believed in the freedom that came with the Good News of the forgiveness of God, he lived and taught a sensitivity to the needs of those who were put off by certain aspects of freedom. As he taught again and again, Christians are to lovingly submit their own desires to the needs of others. We will return to this idea shortly.

Having contextualized this teaching of Paul for the situation of the Early Church, let us consider what it means to us to pray for kings and all who are in high positions. I remember a time, not so long ago, when the attitude of most American Christians adhered pretty closely to Paul's teaching to the Romans. If a person was in office, it was God's will that they should be there, as expressed in the collective action of the electorate. Even if one disagreed with one's elected

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leaders, there was an expectation that one prayed for God to give them wisdom and to guide their actions. But the nastiness of much recent political discourse has seemingly destroyed this common ground where all people of faith could stand. Now, clergy of various stripes actually call on their flocks to pray for the deaths of politicians who are not in compliance with their own views. In some churches, political leaders who take certain stands are denied a sharing in communion, a kind of spiritual death sentence. A simple reading of Paul and of Jesus, who taught that we should love even our bitterest enemies, shows how far away from the spirit of the Good News that this approach is.

Our political leaders need our prayers, whether we agree with them all the time or not. Their jobs are difficult and becoming more so by the day. Can we really imagine that our city, our county, our state, our nation or our world can be made more safe, more prosperous, closer to the Beloved Community of God, without the influence of the Holy Spirit on our political leaders? We must pray for these men and women, if for no other reason than so that we may lead quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and dignity.

By the same token, we cannot confuse our duty to pray for all those in high positions with a blind assent to anything they may do. The Australian theologian William Loader writes, “The focus on political rulers has never ceased to be relevant, although at times it has been watered down into a kind of chaplaincy which never questions what they do, but unwittingly sanctions it. Praying for politicians has to mean more than that. It has to mean holding them up before God in the light of the gospel and its challenges about justice and change.” Bruce Epperly of Lancaster Theological Seminary likewise writes, “I Timothy calls us to “picket and pray.” While this passage has often been abused by those who wish to maintain the unjust economic and political status quo, praying for our leaders, as Gandhi and Martin Luther King asserted, may also involve public protest and civil disobedience.” We must prayerfully strike a balance between praying for the good of all our elected leaders and leader around the globe and being willing to speak out and act in prophetic ways under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to keep them accountable.

Paul reminds us that there is another reason besides enlightened self-interest to pray for the leaders of the world. Like everyone else, they are the objects of God’s plan and will for the salvation of all. God, Paul says, “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” That is why, he reminds Timothy, that he, Paul, was appointed apostle to the Gentiles. The salvation offered through Jesus was not just for the Jews but for members of all nations. Nor was it only for the peasantry among whom Jesus was most at home but also for centurions and merchants and government officials like tax collectors and even for kings. A.K.M. Adam of the University of Glasgow writes, “This saving mission of Jesus is for all... The church acting in wisdom does not presume to decree condemnation before God does, nor may the church offer a cheap pass to just anybody; the limitless, all-encompassing mercy of God is not ours to manage.”

Paul’s instructions to Timothy that prayers are to be made for everyone and his reminder to the younger pastor that even Paul’s mission to the Gentiles had at one time been controversial has led many of those who study this passage to think that the false teachers in Ephesus were preaching an exclusionary gospel, suggesting that certain groups were outside of the offer of God for forgiveness and love to humankind. In chapter four of this letter, Paul says that these

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teachers were also forbidding marriage and demanding abstinence from certain foods. At the same time, we see at the end of our reading that men were lifting hands against each other in anger and argument rather than in prayer and later in the book there indications that some of the women in the congregation have taken their freedom in Christ to mean license for some quite unseemly behavior, including gossip and allowing their sensual desires to lead them astray. There seems to have been a real clash in Ephesus between Christians who wanted to narrow the Good News at one end of the spectrum and those who wanted to equate freedom with licentiousness on the other. Poor Timothy must have had few believers around him on the middle ground. No wonder Paul pointed in this passage to the goal of a quiet and peaceable life in all goodness and dignity!

With all this in mind, I want to turn briefly to the problem of the abrupt ending of this passage in the Revised Common Lectionary. In the New Revised Standard edition of the Bible, verse 8 ends not in a period but in a semi-colon – verses 9 and 10 are the last half of this sentence. Listen: “I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God.” This, insofar as it goes, seems practical. Just as you don’t want people angry and argumentative in worship, neither do you want anyone, male or female, in worship with such flashy clothes that they are a distraction. William Mounce writes in the Word Biblical Commentary, “The clothing Paul is considering is not slightly expensive but extravagantly expensive as suggested by the use of gold jewelry. A.H.M. Jones says clothing could cost as much as 7000 denarii, which equaled more than nineteen years’ wages for an average day laborer.” This admonition of Paul to the women of Ephesus sounds like a reminder to be sensitive to the economic divide that existed in the church and I’m sure that we would all agree that this is appropriate. It’s where Paul goes next that is likely to give us pause.

Chapter two finishes with the following: “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.” Good Shepherd, we have a problem. For those of us committed to the equality in ministry and in all other walks of life between the genders, Paul’s statement seems absolutely outrageous. When we consider that Paul has written “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus;” when we remember that Paul has consistently praised women co-workers in his letters, this doesn’t even sound like Paul. That’s one of the reasons that some scholars have claimed that the Pastorals were not written by Paul at all but by someone who came later and wanted to claim his authority.

I for one am not willing to use that as an out. Somehow, in the wisdom of God, these verses have survived nearly 2000 years for us to read and I think there must be something for us to learn besides the theologically dubious interpretation of the Adam and Eve story. I’m also willing to give Paul the benefit of the doubt. Is he writing here about specific women known to Timothy? Perhaps he means the ones of whom he says in chapter 5, “they learn to be idle, gadding about

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from house to house; and they are not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say... some have already turned away to follow Satan.” I don’t think we would want those women teaching in the church, either. Or has Paul become so concerned with not causing offense to the non-Christians in Ephesus that he wants the women to stop teaching simply because it is offending the neighbors? Is he using bad theology to justify that request?

We cannot know the answer but it is a good reminder that context is tremendously important for understanding our Scriptures. And, if in fact Paul is guilty of the grossest sort of gender discrimination here, then it is a good reminder to us that even our most revered leaders sometimes lose sight of the truths that we cherish together. All the more reason that we must pray for our secular leaders and our spiritual leaders, too. We must pray for those who seem somehow outside the pale for us, as the Gentile believers did at first to the Jewish believers, recognizing them as full brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ and the beloved of God. We must be careful about who we relegate to the status of outsider, about who we forbid to teach, about who we expect to keep silent. For, as our brother Paul reminded Timothy, “there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all.” We are not God and we must stay alert to the movement of the Holy Spirit, which often strikes even God’s people as unlikely. As much as we may want a quiet and peaceable life, God often has other plans for us. For our God is wild and untamed and only in God’s wild and untamed mercy have all of us found forgiveness and love beyond measure. For this greatest of all gifts, thanks be to God.