

A Prayer for the President

1 Timothy 2:1-7

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The Apostle Paul writes to young Timothy urging him to pray for the king and others in high positions of authority. When I read that passage, what I heard instantly was the Apostle Paul urging me to pray for President Bush. As I slept on that notion, the prayer for our president evolved into a sermon. So, I feel like I am offering this sermon to God, much like the choir feels its anthems are offerings to God.

When I think of praying for our president, I think of praying that he will grow in his passion for peace, and keep on growing in that passion until he is totally consumed by it. I am praying that he will come to the end of his second term and that he will be known in America and in Afghanistan and North Korea and Iran as the peace president. I am praying that he will be captivated by that sculpture on the front lawn of the United Nations, the one that interprets Isaiah's vision of peace: the implements of war beaten into the implements of agriculture.

I am praying that our president will become fixated on the notion of peace and wrapped up in the strategies of peace and will act boldly to establish peace wherever his influence has an impact. Many of you will remember Hans and Lotte Tschinkel, former members who were passionate environmentalists. Hans would walk through Cotton Hollow every Monday morning picking up the litter visitors had left behind over the weekend. Their son Walter teaches at Florida State University. He is a world renowned expert on ants and ant colonies and ant culture and ant mating rituals, and ant economics, and ant anything else you want you know.

I am praying that our president will be as committed to studying the ways of peace as Hans and Lotte were to understanding the delicate balance of ecology, and as Walter is to mastering the pathology of ants.

The blessed Prayer of St. Francis begins, “Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.” O God, bless our president with a passion for being an instrument of peace.

When I think of praying for our president, I think of praying that he will come to open his arms to the full diversity of God’s creation, seeing the beauty and the sacredness of all God’s children no matter where they happen to live, no matter what language they speak or what god they worship. I am praying that he will resist the temptation to assign value to peoples and cultures based on level of education, or intelligence quotients, or gross national product, or any criteria other than the Biblical criteria that we are all created in the image of God. I am praying that he would show up one of these Fridays at the House of Abraham, the Habitat for Humanity house at 21 Loomis Street and there swing a hammer side by side with the Haitian Family who will reside there; haul lumber with the Islamic volunteers who pause five times a day for prayer; spackle sheet rock with Jewish people who, at lunch time, eat the sandwiches from the kosher deli. I am praying our president will fall head over heels in love with God’s rich diversity of colors and textures and ethnicities.

One can’t recall every moment of one’s life. We tend recall the most precious of our moments. For me, one of those came on one of my Malawi excursions when our daughter, Clarinda, was able to be with us. In the villages, the children swarmed around her like Walter Tschinkel’s ants swarm on a candy wrapper. They wanted to touch her blond hair, something they had never seen before. She was maybe sixteen at the time. At the end of that day, she looked up at me and made a little announcement.

She said, “I’m going to go to college and come back here and teach these children!” I don’t know if she will ever do that, but in that moment, what I witnessed was an opening of the arms to people who, on the surface, had nothing in common with our daughter, but who have the essential in common, that is, they, too, are made in the divine image. It was one of those moments after which I could have died feeling a lifetime of satisfaction, having a true hope for the world.

O God, we are praying for our president. Grant him a heart that treasures all of life.

When I think about praying for our president, I think about praying for him to side with the poor. I pray this way for everyone who is in a position of power, who is in a position of influence, who has resources to make a difference. I pray for people in power to side with the poor because when we do that we are siding with Christ. Jesus gave us the parable of the sheep and the goats. In this terrifying parable he summons the powerful people and invites them into the kingdom of heaven saying, “I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was alone and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.” And the powerful people were stunned, and they asked, ‘when did we do all these things for you?’ And he answered, ‘each time you sided with the poor, you sided with me.’

And then he addresses the other powerful people and invites them to pass through the gates of hell. He reminds them that he was hungry but they fed him not; he was thirsty but they gave him no water; he was alone and they failed to comfort him; he was in prison and they didn’t come for a visit. They, too, are stunned by this invitation, and they ask, ‘when did we see you and fail to come to your aid?’ And he answered, ‘each time you chose to ignore the poor, you chose to have nothing to do with me.’

So, when I think of our president, I think of a man who is in a position of power. And I pray that he will be blessed with an inclination to side with the poor. I can do nothing less. God bless you, Mr. President, with a leaning, not to the left or to the right, but in the direction of the poor.

Lastly, when I think of praying for the president of the United States or for heads of governments in any nation, I think of praying for a capacity to grieve. I pray for our president to carry two hankies with him at all times and several boxes of Kleenex as backup. I would rather see him mount the steps of Air Force One with these than with a briefcase. I have been teaching classes on Grief at all three hospitals in Hartford. I am getting a reputation for knowing something about grief. What I know is that the healthiest people in the world are ones who allow themselves to grieve their losses, who let the tears flow, who do not bury their feelings, but allow themselves to feel the pain of the deaths of their dear ones. The healthiest people in the world are the ones who know that being strong doesn't mean sucking it up and acting tough; it means allowing oneself to feel the agony of a loss.

I think of praying for our president to be one of the healthiest people in the world, grieving with every family who has lost a soldier son, a soldier daughter, grieving as if each wounded warrior were his own off-spring; grieving as if the poet, John Donne, was correct in saying, "Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

O God, grant to our president perfect health, the health that comes by allowing grief its rightful place in the human heart. I do pray for our president. I pray believing that God hears us when we pray. I pray believing that sometimes only God can make a difference. I pray when my own puny efforts have failed. I pray with confidence. I pray today, through this sermon, in the greatest of hope. Amen!