

**Proper 20 – 17 Pentecost – Year C – September 22, 2010 - Homily**  
**Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79: 1-9; 1 Timothy 2: 1-7; Luke 16:1-13**  
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A good friend of mine shared this story with me several years ago. She comes from a large family and there hasn't always been peace between the siblings. One day she shared with one of her sisters how she had prayed and prayed about an issue between herself and another family member, and God just didn't seem to be listening or doing anything about it. She was frustrated and fed up, and had come to her sister seeking advice on how to pray more effectively.

We know from the Gospel stories that Jesus did a lot of praying, especially before and after miracles of healing or feeding, or before making major decisions, like selecting the twelve disciples. We also have a deep insight into the humanity of Jesus from His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest and crucifixion. The practice of prayer was not new. Jesus' example followed that of many people found praying in the Hebrew Scriptures. Perhaps seeing Jesus modeling a different way to pray, the disciples asked Him to teach them how to pray. Jesus' response, as recorded in the Gospels has left us with the legacy, and the beautiful simplicity of the Lord's Prayer.

In the reading from 1 Timothy we hear more about prayer, specifically to offer prayers for kings and those in positions of power. I wonder how many of us have a hard time praying for the welfare of those in high positions, that is, those who have authority over nations of the world. I don't know about you, but I see enough "NObama" bumper stickers around. I can only presume that the drivers are not offering prayers of thanksgiving for our President. Then there is the question of how many of us pray for the leaders of nations that we consider enemies of the U.S, even after we hear the writer of 1 Timothy tell us that this is what God desires of us by virtue of the word 'all'?

It is the little word 'all' that frequently causes us to struggle in our prayer lives, over just how much 'all' really means. In other words, does praying for 'all' only mean praying for all Christians or all those in our own family or community? In this short passage from 1 Timothy the word "all" or "everyone" appears six times in the English translation. That is a lot of 'all' and nothing less than 'all'. Is it confusing, or are we just rationalizing? In 'all' honesty, Christians sometimes have a hard time with the implicit inclusivity of 'all'.

As Christians, we hold specific and incomparable beliefs that are not shared by everyone in the world. The reality is that we live in relativistic and secular times, where it has become normative to hear public demands to uphold the separation of church and state, and the rights of individuals to free speech, and freedom of religion. The cultural message is that faith is a private matter between an individual and their deity -- or not -- as the case may be. In today's society, Christianity or even faith in general is not widely acknowledged as a matter for community, or any type of public gathering, even when it comes to basic ethics like working together for the common good.

In the Christian community, we proclaim Jesus Christ as the only Son of God. We also believe that Jesus, God incarnate, is fully human as well as fully divine. We make claims that are not popular in today's culture, such as Jesus being the definitive expression of how to live life in full accord with God's will. The history of salvation, or God's story if you like, as told to us through the Scriptures, points to God's concern for all creation, not just a few people or a few geographical areas. God cares about the whole of creation. Whatever our differences, be they social, economic, political, you name it -- God's deepest desire is expressed as love, compassion, and concern for all. Not just the region we happen to live in, or the people *we* think are worthy of God's love. All. What then is our role in all this?

When it comes to our Christian doctrines, we do have exclusive claims that are wholly disagreeable to many people. That to the point where we might even say that secularism, humanism, or consumerism are the new gods or idols that are now shaping Western society. That does not mean that we hide our light under a basket in shame or fear. We are still called to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in our words and our deeds. Prayer is one of those deeds. It is another way God calls us to action. So we must also ask why prayer is clearly so important to God, and how God uses our prayers to serve God's ultimate purpose of reconciling the whole world to God's self through Christ Jesus our Lord.

It was clear that my friend was upset and even angry that her prayers seemed to have gone unanswered. Her sister listened carefully before she spoke. "Dear one," she said, "the gift of prayer is not that we get what we ask from God. The gift of prayer is that it changes us." My friend was astounded. You know those cartoons where good ideas are marked by drawings of huge light bulbs glowing brightly. This was a huge ah ha moment for her. After taking time to reflect on her sister's words of wisdom, windows of possibility opened up for her, new vistas came into perspective. God always answers our prayers, but often it is not in the way we expect. What is important to God is the attitude of our hearts, and the transformation that can only be wrought in relationship. First and foremost, in our relationship with God, that prepares us for relationship with others. As 1 Timothy reminds us, prayer brings us into relationship even with those in authority, the leaders of communities, and nations, including those we perceive to be our enemies.

What we cannot achieve in the flesh, God achieves for us in prayer through our great high priest, Jesus Christ, in the power of our Advocate, the Holy Spirit. When we lift up our friends *and* our enemies in prayer, we are in effect, standing in the shadow of God's almighty presence. Through Christ's intercession on our behalf, in the power of the Holy Spirit, our prayers are constantly before God. More importantly when we pray, our hearts are open to God, and you and I are transformed according to God's will. This transformation is precisely what we are asking for in the words of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Only God knows the secrets of all hearts. Only God can judge us all with complete equity, regardless of our personal or political differences, and only God can reconcile all creation to God's self.

As followers of Christ, we seek to align our wills with God's will, and so we are without excuse or compromise in praying for 'all'. There is no part of 'all' that we can ignore when it comes to prayer, because God is the Creator, and God is in all and above all. God changes us through prayer, so that we can be co-creators with God in transforming the world.

Amen.