

“The citizen’s prayer”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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1 Timothy 2:1-7

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When Jenna and I first started dating, she laid down one very clear rule for her dad and me: NO TALKING POLITICS. And of course, because Jenna’s dad and I value our lives, we have obeyed this rule.

It’s probably for the best.

Jenna’s dad and I are similar in many ways. We are pastors. Both Presbyterian. Both introverted men paradoxically adept at being gregarious. We both love Jenna.

We are, however, also very different. In the last presidential election, my father-in-law supported a certain candidate who shall not be named. Honestly, “supported” doesn’t even capture it. He gave the invocation at this man’s rally in Louisville.

Politically, my father-in-law and I are different people. He listens to Rush Limbaugh; I listen to NPR. He’s Blue Lives Matter; I’m Black Lives Matter. He chops down trees; I hug them. He enjoys slapstick comedy; I enjoy weeping to artsy, tragic foreign films. He’s down-to-earth; I’m arguably pretentious (you know this because I used the word “arguably”). If he’s Jay Pritchett on “Modern Family,” I’m Mitchell. If he’s Hank in “King of the Hill,” I’m Frasier—I’m not even in “King of the Hill.” If he’s Archie Bunker, I’m his annoying hippie son-in-law Mike.

I still love him, just as he loves me. He’s been there for us through some really hard times; he’s been a wonderful grandfather to Emerson. And despite his political views, he and my mother-in-law raised Jenna to be an independent, empowered, equal, fierce woman. Honestly, I have trouble reconciling the man I love with his political views, just as I’m sure he does with me. Apparently he once told Jenna, “Patrick’s a good guy, even if he is a liberal who doesn’t golf.” That was probably the nicest thing he’s ever said about me.

For Jenna’s sanity, we stay away from politics.

A lot of us would recommend the same for the church. In fact, some of you are already squirming.

Not only can politics in church be divisive, but it can distract from our true reason for being here: the worship of God. When we walk through those doors, we’re not Democrats or Republicans; we’re Christians. Our allegiance is to Christ. Politics in church muddies that allegiance. Here, everyone is welcome to the love and grace of Christ.

In this church, we talk openly about issues of justice—poverty, racism, climate change, patriarchy—because the Bible commands us to be about the welfare of the city, to work for justice and stand with the marginalized. Some folks might think that’s already too political, but we—a church founded on the cause of the abolition of slavery—know better: Jews and Christians were talking about these matters long before a Democrat or Republican ever set foot on earth.

What we steer clear of are partisan politics. We don’t tell you who to vote for; we don’t get into Democrats vs Republicans.

The problem is that this absence of politics in the church leaves a question mark, especially now as we enter the election season. We don’t know how our faith life should relate to our political life. They’re both important to us, both arguably (there it is again!) integral to who we are and what we choose to value. We are Christians, but we are also citizens. I can’t sometimes be one and other times the other—that’s confusing, and potentially contradictory. I just want to be Patrick, the whole person God made me to be, citizen and Christian, in every context.

This was a problem for the early church. There was a big debate going on: Should they just separate from society altogether and be apolitical? Should they subordinate their faith to the politics of the day? Or was there a way for these parts of their lives to come together?

Into this struggle enters the author of 1 Timothy, traditionally considered the Apostle Paul, who writes to a young protégé. Paul says *this* is the most important thing, the first thing, above all else: Pray.

OK, seems a little too easy—on par with the ubiquitous “thoughts and prayers” after every mass shooting.

We picture prayer as folding your hands, mumbling some words, and going on with life. But I don’t think that’s Paul’s understanding of prayer. In 1 Timothy, he describes prayer as “supplication,” or *deësis* in Greek, which is to throw your whole body into an appeal on someone’s behalf. In Byzantine art, the term refers to depictions of Mary and John lifting high their arms to beg salvation for humanity. Such prayer requires all of me—not just the “Sunday-morning” me.

He also uses the word “intercession,” or *enteuxis* in Greek, which means to have an interview, a conversation, where you make an urgent request for the sake of truth and community and helping someone.

Prayer is a conversation—an exchange of words and love—between God, us, and our neighbor. When I sit with someone who is troubled, the prayer isn’t just at the end, when we close our eyes and hold hands. Our whole time together is prayer, because we are sharing hurts and hopes, listening together for a word from God—and promising to act upon that word.

That’s a much bigger concept of prayer than many of us are used to. It’s too big to be confined only to “religious” moments, and Paul knows it. He says this prayer—this conversation—should

extend even to kings and all in high positions. When we call up our representatives, or stand on the steps of City Hall to rally for a cause, or whenever we seek together to discern a faithful and just path forward, we are praying.

What's more is that Paul says to pray for *everyone*. Pray for your leaders. Pray for people who are different from you. Pray for your enemies. At the time of 1 Timothy, that meant praying for the Roman emperor who was persecuting you.

Today, it means if you're a Democrat, pray for Republicans; Republicans pray for Democrats. Pray for President Trump, for Governor Cuomo, for Auburn City Council. Pray for them, Paul says, because our world—our peace and dignity—depends on them. But also pray for them, because God desires their wellbeing, and so should you. That's hard, but think about how that changes our political conversations—if the person I'm debating, the person I'm maybe contending with over life-and-death issues of truth and justice, knows that I love them and am actively seeking their wellbeing. It's going to change how I talk to them, and it's going to change how they hear me.

Don't miss a very important word, though. Paul says: pray *for* your leaders. He doesn't say: pray *to* your leaders. While we may not typically (I hope!) address our prayers to our President or Governor, the people of Paul's time did. In fact, all who lived in the Roman Empire were commanded, under threat of death, to pray *to* the Roman emperors, as gods. That one preposition renders 1 Timothy a document as seditious and revolutionary as the Declaration of Independence.

Paul says, We will pray for our leaders; we will love them with a Christian love; but we will not make them our gods.

There is only one God, says Paul, only one Savior.

When we pray, when seek the truth, when we deliberate between what is right and what is wrong, when we consider our lives as citizens, we as Christians do not look to a political party; we do not follow any purported savior on the Right or the Left; we do not conform our minds to any president or governor; we look to God alone. We look to the One who said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18).

The citizen's prayer takes our faith into the public square, into the voting booth, onto the steps of City Hall; it is neither blind allegiance nor hostility. It is loving entreaty; it is the desire for all to be held in the arms of truth, love, and justice. Then we will be whole.

It has happened before. The prophets of Judah and Israel once visited kings, to pray for them and share God's vision with them. Americans, on the eve of freedom, in places such as Boston and Virginia, organized days of prayer and fasting to protest unjust British laws. Thomas Jefferson wrote, "The effect of the day through the whole colony was like a shock of electricity," leading the people of Virginia to elect delegates for self-rule. And because that freedom at the time was

not extended to all Americans, leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and A. Philip Randolph organized sit-ins and marches as acts of prayer. In my own life, I have seen Quakers stand in rain and snow, year-round, in prayerful vigil for peace. I have read the frequent prayers of our denomination's stated clerk which speak to issues of civic leadership and justice. I have seen prayer protests on the news happening right now in Hong Kong and Puerto Rico.

I have heard Christians stand in the middle of a Publix grocery and pray in thanks to God, thank the store and its owners, call upon (and indeed believe in) their better angels, and ask God to move their hearts to pay a fair wage for their hard-working tomato pickers.

That is the citizen's prayer. Strident in love. Citizenship informed by faith. **Amen.**