

Praying _____ Our Enemies

Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7

So let's admit it – our polarization as a nation is reflected also in the church, and is sometimes even wider in the church. We might consider them political wars or cultural wars or economic wars or ideological wars; they are all theological wars. But let's not deny that we are at war. By definition, those with whom we battle are "enemies." So rather than trying to deny that we have enemies, I want to ask what we do with our enemies. Our texts today give us a couple of interesting ways to engage that question. And so I left the preposition in the sermon title blank. Let's try on a few.

Change the spelling to "p-r-e-y-i-n-g" and one could insert "upon" – "preying upon our enemies." We are still a year away from national elections, yet predatory behavior is already being waged between opponents for office, even within the same party. It seems that the entirety of the four-year presidential term has become a season of electioneering, of continually preying upon enemies.

I once had the opportunity to visit Walden Pond outside Boston, made famous by Henry Thoreau. As I circled the lake on a bucolic pathway I witnessed a hawk swoop down near me, pick up an unlucky mouse, and perch just a few feet above me as it dismembered it, blood spurting everywhere as it gorged itself. Sometimes we wish much the same of our opponents – that they are destroyed while we lick our chops.

That is indeed the character of many Psalm prayers, including today's lectionary Psalm. I'll call it "Praying against our enemies," rather than "preying upon them." The ultimate intent is the same, that our enemies be destroyed. It is one of the most common forms of prayer in the psalms. We call such psalms "imprecatory." In them the psalmist lashes out against those who prosper at our expense. More than mere blues (what biblical scholars would call psalms of lament), these psalms are angry and vengeful. The psalmist leads us to pray *against* our enemies. A lot.

Before we dismiss these psalms as being unrighteous or unworthy for us to utter, let's remember that the Psalter was Jesus' Prayer Book. He prayed Psalm 79. "Pour out your anger on the nations!" The same Jesus who taught us to love our enemies prayed this prayer. Like countless others who have prayed these psalms, Jesus took out his frustration and anger not on his enemies, but in prayer to God. God can handle it. "Take it to the Lord in prayer," we sing about praying *against* our enemies. The Psalms are a release valve for our anger. In prayer, anything can be said without sinning. The most important feature of prayer is its authenticity. If you feel it, pray it!

After all, we need to blow off our steam *somewhere*, don't we? But praying against our enemies is more than a cathartic exercise. It is honest acknowledgment that we are constantly wrestling against obstacles, whether they are individuals or institutions or systems. Jesus talks about this

in his enigmatic description of the milieu in which he and John the Baptist were doing ministry: “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.” (Matthew 11:12) Wrestling against evil is an indispensable part of prayer.

The sentiments in the opening sentences of 1 Timothy 2 are echoed elsewhere in Paul’s writings. Notably, Paul asks us in Romans 13 to *submit to* civil authorities. Here we are asked to *pray for* them. Of course, we should *want* pray for those to whom we must submit, for our own good at the very least, something our text freely acknowledges.

Presbyterians make prayer for governmental authorities a standard part of our weekly prayers of the people. In so doing we follow the cues of 1 Timothy 2. It seems eminently right and good and pious to do so. But let’s step back into the late first century.

Christianity was under assault by rulers seeking to destroy it. Whether Rome’s imperial or Jerusalem’s religious authorities, all powers were being brought to bear to kill this movement known as “The Way,” just as they had sought to destroy its Founder. The greatest enemies of Christians were those who held seats of power. By counseling us to pray for authorities, our text is inviting us to do nothing less than “Praying *for* Our Enemies.”

You mean, pray for those trying to kill us? Yes. Pray for those standing *against* everything we stand *for*? Yes.

Our text directs us to pray for everyone. Rulers hostile to The Way are especially specified, and for early Christians they were perhaps the most egregious of enemies. Pilate. Herod. Caligula. Nero. Pray for them!

From its beginnings, members of the Christian movement have also faced many lesser enemies, just as we do today. Friends and family who disagree with us about things we think important. Congregations and denominations that champion causes we despise, or resist causes we champion. Neighbors who see things differently from us. People from other social or ethnic or economic or political groups. Any way we divide ourselves into “us” vs. “them” is an act of enmity. So how do we relate to such enemies?

Pray for them. Every one of them. I have discovered that it is hard to stay angry at someone I’m praying for. What would it be like if our presidential candidates – or their supporters – sought first to pray for each other, rather than to vanquish each other? Closer to home, imagine the difference it would make to squabbles within the church if our first commitment was to pray for each other, rather than to argue against each other about things over which we disagree, whether great or small.

The venerable Rabbi in “Fiddler on the Roof” is asked, “Is there a proper blessing for the Czar?” The Rabbi reflects a moment, then offers, “May the Lord bless and keep the Czar – as far away from us as possible.” Our text asks Christians being persecuted by their rulers to offer not only

supplication for them, but also *blessing*. I must confess that it is easier for me to offer supplications for some folk than it is to bless them. Wishing people well without condition is exquisitely difficult. Our text invites us to a difficult pathway. It calls us to live in the way of the crucified One who blesses those who crucify him, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Finally, I invite us to consider for a moment a prayer we will jointly offer in just a few minutes, our Lord's Prayer. When his disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he instructed them to pray *together*, not just alone. *Our Father. Give us. Forgive us.*

Speaking of the Lord's Prayer in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin asks us, "With *whom* are we praying when we say *Our Father*?" The answer must be, "All of God's children." Or in traditional Reformed language, "The elect." And who might that include? We don't know.

Only "the Lord knows who are his." (2 Timothy 2:19) So, Calvin says, we ought to assume that *every* person is included, even those who have not yet made a Christian profession, and thus join in prayer with *everyone*. (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.38) Not just members of our prayer group. Not just those whom we like. Not just those whose doctrines or politics agree with ours. Not just those who belong to the same racial-ethnic or socio-economic group as us. Not just Presbyterians. Not even just those who claim to be Christian.

If praying *for* our enemies can change us, how much more will we be changed by praying *with* our enemies! Praying in Jesus' way expands us. It causes us to reach out to join hands and hearts with those least likely to have common cause with us.

One of our neighboring presbyteries adopted a practice at their meetings that has dramatically changed the climate of their gatherings. They had a pattern of being highly contentious with each other, and sought prayerfully a better way to handle their disagreements. Now, whenever there is a question likely to raise differences of opinion, rather than opening the floor for debate the Moderator asks the body to discuss what they believe the Lord wants them to do. When the discussion concludes, the Moderator leads in a prayer that goes something like this, "Lord, we have considered the matter before us. Now lead us by your Spirit to discern what is best, according to your will." Then the Moderator asks how many believe the Lord is leading them to do this, or not to do it. I saw them go through this process to resolve a very difficult and potentially divisive matter with grace and unanimity. They were demonstrating the power of praying *with* those who might otherwise have been our "enemies."

Our posture toward our enemies is one of the best measures of our discipleship to Jesus. When that posture is clothed by prayer – whether by praying *against* our enemies, *for* our enemies, or *with* our enemies – we bear witness more fully and faithfully to the God who has already broken down the walls of human hostility through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Our Lord's Table is the place where this way of living begins, and where it is nourished and

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sustained. Here we are all on the same level, co-recipients of heaven's abundance. Here we give thanks with and for *everyone*. No exceptions.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.