

“Praying for Those in Power: A Spiritual Paradigm Shift”

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Scripture Readings: Psalm 146; Ephesians 2:11-14; 1 Timothy 2:1-4

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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

News that the Washington Nationals baseball team made the playoffs was eclipsed by *other* news from the District of Columbia this week. “Brace yourself,” wrote *The New York Times*, “for the internet impeachment.”¹ Journalist Kevin Roose wrote that “even before the impeachment inquiry ... was announced on Tuesday,” Facebook was filled with “ads for impeachment-themed merchandise, including ... bumper stickers and ... T-shirts.” And candidates’ campaign coffers began to fill, because they saw the impeachment inquiry as an opportunity to fundraise, ramp up voter registration, and sign petitions. And in private strategy rooms, “internet trolls discussed which memes, videos, and new stories to push on social media ... to [shape] the narrative.”

“The last time America watched an impeachment inquiry,” wrote Kevin Roose, “it was largely an analog affair. When the House [of Representatives] voted to begin impeachment proceedings against Bill Clinton in 1998, only one in four American homes had internet access. AOL and Yahoo were the biggest websites in the world, and ‘tweet’ was a sound birds made. ... In many ways,” he goes on, “[this] is a made-for-the-internet event. The political stakes are high, the dramatic story unspools tidbit by tidbit, and the stark us-versus-them dynamics provide plenty of fodder for emotionally charged social media brawls. ... Disinformation experts are bracing for a fresh cyclone of chaos,” he writes, “complete with fast-twitch media manipulation, droves of false and misleading claims, and hyper-polarized audiences fiercely clinging to their side’s version of reality.” “Politics [in the social media age] is being consumed like entertainment,” said one Republican digital strategist. “It’s a choose-your-own-adventure reality.”

Polls published on Thursday indicated that Americans are evenly divided over impeachment: 43% support it; 43% don’t; and 13% are undecided.² But however you slice it, impeachment is, as David Brooks put it on Thursday, a “rare and grave crisis in American life.”³ It’s the sign of some failure. And it’s sad. And because this is happening in the age of social media, the next few weeks promise to be noisy and raucous and partisan; and the us vs. them paradigm will shape how many interpret events. But our tradition, and specifically today’s scripture readings, can offer some perspective. Actually, they offer a different paradigm entirely - a paradigm for us *to think with*, to borrow a phrase from the late anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/26/technology/trump-impeachment-disinformation.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>

² <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/09/26/poll-support-impeachment-trump-1515012>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/26/opinion/impeachment-trump-mistake.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>
 age David Brooks actually uses the phrase to make a different point: “Impeachment is no longer a rare and grave crisis in American life; it’s becoming a device parties use when the House and the presidency are in the hands of different parties.”

The name many of us associate with a paradigm shift is Thomas Kuhn. In his book *How to Fly a Horse*, Kevin Ashton provides some background information about Thomas Kuhn.⁴ Kuhn taught Western philosophy at Berkeley until 1979 when he went to teach at MIT until his death in 1996. But before teaching at Berkeley, Kuhn had spent sixteen years at Harvard where he earned three degrees in physics, joined the prestigious Society of Fellows, but was later denied tenure. “Kuhn’s problem was that he changed his mind,” writes Kevin Ashton. “[Kuhn’s] degrees were in physics, but while working on his PhD, he had developed an interest in philosophy, a subject for which he had passion but no training.” “Harvard was not sure what to do with him, neither was the University of California, which hired him as a professor of philosophy, then changed his role to include history. It was clear he was no longer a scientist.” Kuhn’s research interests changed from science to philosophy after reading Aristotle’s *Physics*. And he began to wrestle with a question: “How does science move from one set of theories to another?” “By 1962, after fifteen years of [wrestling with the question], [he] had his answer. ... [Kuhn argued] that science proceed[s] in a series of revolutions where ways of thinking chang[e] completely.” Kuhn “called these ways of thinking ‘paradigms.’” Paradigm shifts are new ways of seeing. New lenses to look through.

Maybe it’s time for a *spiritual* paradigm shift. A new way of seeing in this age of made-for-the-internet events of disinformation and cyclones of chaos, where politics is consumed like entertainment, and where us vs. them dynamics provide fodder for social media brawls. A new paradigm that is actually an ancient one. Today’s reading from the Letter of First Timothy provides such a perspective. The writer of this text was probably a disciple of St. Paul, who developed his teacher’s ideas. “I urge,” says the writer, that “prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions.” Pray for people in positions of power, says the writer. Pray for Nancy Pelosi. Pray for Mitch McConnell. Pray for state and local leaders, principles of schools, presidents of universities. Pray for the president of the United States. I bet First Timothy’s prayer paradigm was controversial when first written. Controversial because of the persecution many early Christians faced at the hands of “kings and all who were in high positions.” First Timothy was probably written shortly after the death of St. Paul. Paul’s death is remembered in Christian history as a martyrdom - capital punishment for being a Christian. Paul may have died during the same persecution that led to St. Peter’s death - also a martyrdom. Both apostles, and countless other Christians, were killed during the maniacal reign of the Roman Emperor Nero - the emperor who, it was said, literally fiddled while Rome burned (a fire he may have set himself, but which he blamed on the Christians). Some early Christian writers called Nero the “antichrist.” Pray for emperors - even Nero - says the writer of First Timothy. After Nero there were other Roman emperors who unleashed persecutions against the followers of Christ. The emperor Domitian in the late first century persecuted Christians as did the emperor Trajan in the second century, and the emperor Decius in the third century, and the emperor Diocletian in the early fourth century, and several others until the empire itself became Christian in the mid-fourth century. In the midst of the fires of persecution - when fellow Christians were being crucified and tossed to beasts in the colosseum - the Christian writer Tertullian said, “we call upon God for the safety of the Emperor [We] pray [to] God for our enemies,” he wrote, and we pray for “blessings [on] our persecutors,” because, wrote Tertullian, quoting First Timothy, “the Scripture says, ‘pray for kings, and princes, and [those in] power.’”⁵

⁴ Kevin Ashton, *How to Fly a Horse: The Secret History of Creation, Invention, and Discovery* (New York: Anchor Books, 2015), 105-107.

⁵ Tertullian, *Apology*, xxx-xxxii.

Pray for leaders: the Neros and the Diocletians, the Pontius Pilates, the Pharisees; Mayors and School Board members, ministers and superintendents, CEOs and Senators, committee chairs and church officers. Pray for the Pelosis and the Trumps, for all who are in high positions. “There is no one right way to pray,” writes Roberta Bondi in her book *To Pray and to Love*.⁶ Each prayer is unique, because each person is unique, and “prayer,” she says, “is an expression of each person’s relationship to God.” “Learning to pray,” she says, “means finding a way of prayer that suits [you]” Scripture itself is a rich resource for prayer. There’s the example of Moses, who converses with God face to face as with a friend. There’s the example of Elijah, who sought solitude and quiet, and heard God speak in a still small voice. There are Psalmists who treat prayer as the language of faith: “The LORD - *not human leaders* - is my light and my salvation,” wrote one Psalmist, “whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” There’s the example of Jesus, who taught his followers to bring *any* request to God in prayer - to treat God as a loving parent, always willing to listen: “Our Father . . .,” is how he taught his disciples to begin their prayers. The prophet Jeremiah is known as “the weeping prophet,” because of his tear-filled laments to God for the state of his country. Paul exhorts his readers to “pray without ceasing”; to make every breath a prayer. There’s the example of Mary, who, in a prayer of fury, spoke of the mighty being cast down from their thrones. And there’s the tender example of the apostle John, who, in the gospel that bears his name, leaned against the breast of Jesus, seeking closeness with the divine.

Sometimes the pure trust and honesty of children can teach us how to pray. Someone once loaned me a book that was a series of letters written by children to their pastors. Each letter contained something the children were praying about. In one letter, ten year old Laurie from NYC wrote, “Dear Pastor, Please pray for all the airline pilots. I am flying to California tomorrow.” In another letter, nine year old Jack from Chicago wrote, “Dear Pastor, We say grace every night before we eat dinner even when we have leftovers from the night before.” And eight year old Theresa from Milwaukee wrote, “Dear Pastor, I know God loves me but I wish God would give me an ‘A’ on my report card so I could be sure.” It’s not the specifics of each request that matters; it’s the honesty of these children. If you were to pray for the President, or for the Speaker of the House, or for the Senate majority leader as we enter this season of impeachment, what might you say to God?

The surprising effect of prayer is not so much that it changes circumstances, or that it changes the ones we pray for. The mere act of holding in prayer the name of a leader can change *us*. The writer of First Timothy promises that praying for leaders can bring *us* peace. The Greek word the writer uses to describe this peace is where we get our word “eremitic” from - a word that meant monkish solitude in much of Christian history, but which carries another meaning of “serenity” or “calmness.” Prayer quiets the soul; it can blanket us with a pleasant sense of peace. “Sometimes merely talking to God,” wrote Christian Wiman, “can bring peace to our spirits.” “A mind blurred by anxiety or despair,” he goes on, “might find [in prayer] . . . a trace of peace.”⁷ Andrew Newberg, a professor at UPenn’s School of Medicine, has been studying the effects of prayer on the human brain for the past 25 years. Newberg has found that the parietal lobe of the brain - the part of the brain that gives us a sense of self and place - begins to shut down when we pray. He’s scanned the brains of meditating Tibetan monks,

⁶ Roberta C. Bondi, *To Pray & to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), ch. 3.

⁷ These quotes come from different places. The first is adapted from Wiman’s book *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 98. The second is adapted from a poem titled “Prayer”: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/146851/prayer-5afddceb3faf9>

Catholic nuns praying the Rosary, pentecostal evangelists praying in other tongues; and regardless of the tradition, those who are deep in prayer find that their sense of self fades as they experience a deep connection - a oneness - with all life; and they experience a sense of serenity. Prayer quiets the soul.

But prayer does something else. Prayer brings close the one we pray for. And in bringing them close - bringing them into, what fourth century monk St. Anthony of Egypt once called the “internal desert” (the place of solitude within) - in drawing the one we’re praying for into our hearts, we erase the distinction between *us* and *them*. The people we pray for stop being “they” or “them” and become part of “us.” Praying for a leader makes it hard to hate them, and it cracks open the possibility of living into a new paradigm - a paradigm of compassion; compassion and grace even for those leaders who seem least deserving of either. None of this excuses appalling behavior, of course. The Hebrew prophets, the Psalmists, Jesus himself ferociously spoke truth to power. But they all recognized, with the writer of today’s reading from Ephesians, that God really does love everyone - even her most wayward children. And that ultimately, as writer Anne Lamott once put it using a baseball metaphor: “God’s grace bats last [for everyone].”

Grace is a miracle. It’s a Thomas Kuhn-like different paradigm. It’s revolutionary - revolutionary like the resurrection of Christ; revolutionary because grace doesn’t follow our well-worn pathways of commonsense and logic. God’s grace can’t be earned or bought or traded for. No amount of good deeds will win more of God’s grace; no amount of bad deeds will nullify grace. Grace is God’s unconditional love for every person, even for those whose bad behavior makes God weep. Grace proclaims that our God is a God who can do what seems to us to be the impossible.

Let me close today with an insight from Reverend Elizabeth Chandler Felts. She wrote recently about the God of impossible things.⁸ “Personally,” she wrote, “I think rationality is overrated, especially when we live with children. ... That’s why, when my kid was little, I hit the pause button on logic, especially in the Bible. I taught her the miracles as pure, undiluted facts - no hedging, no tidy revision to accommodate science. Did Jesus walk on water? You betcha. Did Moses bring water from a rock? Absolutely. When she asked about Easter, I told her that Jesus died on a Friday and was raised from death on a Sunday. I told her about dazzling angels and weeping women and disciples who wouldn’t believe. ... I told her about the resurrection because I wanted her *always* to be able to find her way back to life from the hundred little deaths she would have to endure during her lifetime. I wanted her to have a breadcrumb trail to retrace her weary steps from despair to hope. I figured if she had a narrative for resurrection, then she had a fighting chance of survival in a world where death really knows how to deal a blow. It didn’t hurt her a bit. She grew up to be an imaginative soul who can hold together a huge armful of contradictory truths without breaking a sweat. And she still has that fighting chance.”

...Maybe praying for our leaders - even those who seem endlessly corrupt - is, in the end, a statement of faith; faith in the God of grace, who is capable of doing what we humans think is impossible. Amen.

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https://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_for_small_group_discussion_impossible_things?utm_campaign=dd_sep23_19&utm_medium=email&utm_source=unitedchurchofchrist