

Barre Congregational Church

September 18, 2022: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ **Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost** ~

“Prayers for peace and a dignified life”

Our services can be found on our website at www.barrechurch.com

Scripture Reading: Luke 15 1-10

I. Introduction:

To pray is such a personal, and yet powerful experience, something beyond our human existence where we seek to find answers for our daily life situations. When we go through personal struggles, we pray to God for help and guidance. We may see specific concerns in our communities, the country, and the world, and sometimes we may not know how to act to bring about the changes that are needed. We may talk about it, and offer some solutions, and do the best we can, but then we know we can pray and ask for God’s help and intervention to bring about the change that is needed. We especially need God’s help when we need peace and a dignified life, when life is not easy. We may feel uncertain, but deep down we know that God hears our prayers...

II. To pray for peace and a dignified life

Our passage in 1 Timothy is a call to prayer for a peaceful and dignified life. It is a letter to Timothy, who was an associate of Paul, and a very active church leader in Ephesus, and was Paul’s representative to the churches in Thessalonica and Corinth when he could not visit himself. The purpose of this letter is for Timothy to encourage the congregation in Ephesus, and its leaders to manage the church well. Part of that responsibility is to help them see the importance of prayer, for all people, and especially for those in authority, government, kings, and others who are leaders of the people. This must have been a difficult request for Timothy, because his friend and colleague, Paul had been arrested and in prison, and the church is in constant assault by those who persecute its people.

We know it is important to pray for those in power, so that they can lead well and make good decisions for everyone. It feels good to pray for them when one feels they care and look out for

their people, but it can be challenging to pray for them when they do not treat their people well, and when people do not feel their needs are met, and they do not feel at peace and dignified, as this letter to Timothy encourages. As I was preparing for this sermon, I was reminded of my life under South African apartheid, when I was in seminary, and when I, like many others became part of a wider religious movement asking this very same question, how do we pray for the government during a time like this? How do we connect with God during a time like this? I remember how we as seminary students grappled with scriptures such as this one in 1st Timothy and Romans 13 that explicitly asks the church to submit to the government. During my preparation I came across this book in my shelf, “When prayer makes news – Churches and Apartheid-A Call to Prayer”, edited by Allan Boesak, who was, and still is a renowned theologian, and became the president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the president of our church, and a critic of the South African Government. For a while he was also one of my professors. The other is Charles Villa Vicencio, another outspoken religious leader in a different church tradition. Allan Boesak writes in the Preface of this book the following, “I believe passionately in prayer. It is an expression of hope and an act of faith. It is to know, not by instinct but through faith, that God is able and willing to respond to the cry of His people. The God and Father of Jesus Christ is the Living God who, in contrast to the false gods of human making, does hear, does care, does act. The same God who heard the cries of the Israelites in bondage and acted to deliver them from the hands of Pharaoh...The God who heard the soft weeping of Hannah is the same God who heard the angry prayers of the Psalms.” This quote reminded me how we came together and prayed and shared our hopes for freedom and peace. Growing up in a country where we did not have peace and dignity as people of color, informed and shaped our faith, our prayer life and how we understood scripture. As a young child of God who learned about God and Jesus Christ and praying for the souls of those who need to come to Christ, for healing and for provision, my spiritual life was now transformed to include a broader, deeper understanding of what prayer means in a context of injustice and suffering. Prayer, I learned then, is a conversation with God about my life, our lives, the good and the bad, the material and the spiritual. Prayer is bringing to God what hurts and what must change. I learned that prayer is crucial to the Christian’s life, both privately and publicly, and that is how the hand of God moves. I learned that prayer is complex, but powerful. It is about asking God to deliver us from evil, because our people suffered at the brutal hands of the apartheid government. Those

were dangerous times, but those were times I learned how to pray for a nation, the country I loved. It was hard to pray for a government who hated us. Why not just hate those who hate us, were the issues discussed. But, then again, hate would not solve the problem. We would become like the ones who hate us, so pray for their souls, and pray for their minds and hearts so they would be transformed. As I prayed with many others, I got to know the God of love, who loves everybody, from the ordinary person to those in power, from the ones who suffer at the hands of the oppressor and the oppressor themselves. I got to know a God who wants justice through the words of Amos who was preaching about justice that would roll like streams of water, and a God who wants peace and dignity for all people. And so, much was done to dismantle apartheid. It took all our prayers and much suffering, and many actions and campaigns and calls for support from the international community to help us. God heard our prayers and helped us through it all.

III. Conclusion: The call to prayer is for Timothy and his church and for us.

Timothy's call to prayer here in our passage is a call to teach his congregation to pray for everyone, for all people, and for kings and all those in authority that "they may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth in God." The word for peaceful in Greek, *eremos*, means quiet or silent. It does not mean a life without turmoil, but that there would be "a general protection by the civil authorities", says David E. Garland and his colleagues in the Expository Bible Commentary on 1st Timothy. To be godly, means the pursuit of that which comes from God, and which is in opposition to that which is not truthful and peaceful. Holiness means to be respectful and serious about the matters of God and of people. In verse 4 it speaks about how God wants all people to be saved, meaning God's redemptive activity includes all people, including all leaders in authority.

What a responsibility Timothy had, but a good one. He would lead a crucial initiative with his congregation to pray and bring all their concerns to God, which would include prayers for the kings and all those in authority. To be church means we are called to pray about things that bother us personally, and our communities. Perhaps we could reflect on the things that bother you and me in our communities? What is going well and what is not going well? We must acknowledge and thank those who lead us well, and express what is not, and then like Timothy we too must heed the call to pray for our leaders in institutions here in our town of Barre, and

beyond, and for the leaders of this world; where there is war, to pray for peace, where there is suffering, to pray for deliverance and peace and dignity. Sometimes we may not feel like praying, or we neglect this important prayer responsibility, and so, may God guide us, help us, remind us, and teach us how to be a praying church and a praying town during a time like this in our world. Amen