

St. Paul: On The Same page *for 10.19.14 Pentecost 19A*

Day One: Isaiah 45:1-7

[God says to pagan king Cyrus,] “I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.

Who do you really dislike in politics? I don't want to use the word “hate,” but many of us even go that far when we consider the governing policies of those we oppose. “Our party” would do the right thing, we believe.

As a pastor, I have been called upon to support certain candidates, or to stand up against others. And, like you, I have my own ideas about what our government should do. But does God only work through Republicans, or Democrats, or Christians?

No, God has raised up honorable people to fulfill his purpose even among those who worship false gods. And he has even used actually evil people, like the Egyptian Pharaoh in the time of Moses, to glorify his name.

So God chose Cyrus, and named him at least 80 years before he was born, and called him to defeat the Babylonians who held his people captive. He not only gave Cyrus great power and wealth, he also called him the “shepherd” of his people Israel. And Cyrus became famous for writing the first charter of human rights, even though he was a pagan.

What earthly ruler do you have trouble believing God could use? Some Christians believed that George W. Bush was evil. Some believe that Barack Obama is evil. Even if both of them were correct, how would God direct you pray for or about your president?

If God could use unbelieving Cyrus to set believers free, what might God be able to achieve through an unbelieving American leader, or Russian leader, or even Muslim leader?

Prayer: *Almighty God, you are the great King above all kings. Help us not to look to any earthly ruler for the answers to our life's problems, but rule us as you know best. Use all the rulers of this world as you see fit, to do your perfect will. Amen.*

Day Two: 1 Thess. 1:1-10

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction... in spite of severe suffering you welcomed the message with joy...

At times, Jesus used signs and wonders to demonstrate that the kingdom of heaven was near. These were not just “miracles,” supernatural acts. They were “signs.” That is, they had a specific purpose, to point to a truth that God wanted his people to know.

We might wish that God would still do such signs and wonders among us. And I believe that he does. But he seldom seems to do such things in the dramatic way that they occurred in the gospels.

However, such signs do not have the same effect among all people and in all times. Among populations of the desperately poor and the sick, God’s miracles pointed to his mercy. But before King Herod, to whom they would only be entertainment, Jesus did no signs.

Among people who are prosperous and powerful, God

worked a different kind of sign. It was the miracle of suffering. The powerful Gentiles, the Romans and Greeks, could not understand how people could suffer so much for their faith and still believe. God used the same miracle behind the Iron Curtain in the last century. And today in nations where Jesus’ followers are persecuted, the most powerful witness is the faithfulness of those who endure sacrifice because of their faith.

Are you still joyful, even in times of suffering, because you know what Jesus has won for you? It was not signs and wonders that proved the power of God’s Word, but the joy and hope that God’s people had even in suffering. Who do you know that is an example of that sort of faith, and of God’s sustaining power? How might that example be more powerful than if God gave you good things and an easy life?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I would not dare ask for suffering. You know I desire good things. But I am willing, Lord, to be your instrument in any way you choose. I know that you know best. Amen.*

Day Three

Gospel: Matthew 22:15-22

“Teacher,” [the Pharisees] said, “we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. . . . Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

Think of this as a press conference. Can you picture it? The candidate’s opponents have prepared trick questions. They hope that Jesus will say the wrong thing, and then they will be able to carry his answer everywhere.

But what do they reveal from their flattery? They start by saying, “Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.”

Obviously, everyone could see that Jesus was a man of God. Since this was evident to everyone, why do you suppose they continued to resist him? Perhaps because it is not just this teacher from Nazareth that they want to disobey, but God himself.

Why else do we quarrel with God’s wisdom about how to use our earthly wealth? He tells us that we should obey

those who are in authority, to pay our taxes. And he tells us that we ought to devote 10% of all that he gives us to service in his kingdom. But we balk at the idea.

The Pharisees want to trap Jesus into advocating rebellion against the government or rebellion against God, but it is they who are in rebellion. They are the ones who want their money to be their own, and to serve God only under their own conditions.

Jesus reminds them, and us, that both Caesar and God have a right to call upon us. We are not our own. All that we have comes from God, and we are a part of a community and a nation.

“Give to God what belongs to God,” and what is that? It is your very self. You are his, and he loves you. Is that such a burden to bear?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I belong to you, body and soul. Now let me be your servant. Do not just take some small percentage of the gifts you have given me, but take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee.
Amen.*

Day Four: Philippians 1:3-5

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

The officers of our congregation and some of our staff have been reading a book called, “Autopsy of a Deceased Church,” by Thom Rainer. (And I would recommend this short book to anyone who wishes to help encourage their church to be stronger and healthier.) In chapter 9, the author points out that one of the main reasons that congregations die is because they lose their sense of purpose. They forget why they were founded.

We remember, don’t we? In theory we do. But our day to day lives get so filled with other things, we forget about the work of the church. Worse than that, even our church lives get so busy, so filled with repairs and committee meetings and budgets, that we forget why we are even going to meetings at all.

But there IS a purpose behind all the activity at the church. There is a reason for

our sacrificing and our giving. There is a reason for the long discussions, seeking the right decision for our ministry.

What is it? Mr. Rainer reminds his readers of the 1980 US Olympic hockey team, the one that has been called the “miracle on ice.” He says the moment they became a real team was when they stopped saying which college they played hockey for and began, instead, to say, “I play for the United States of America.”

Which team are you on? What goal are we striving for? We have one goal, to make disciples here where God has placed us, baptizing and teaching them. We are partners in the gospel, as Paul says. We share the same good news, and all that we do here is for this purpose, to share it.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you have given me a mission. I am your partner, and I am a partner with all these people in my congregation. Help us to work together, to sacrifice together, to serve together, and to give together for one purpose. And Lord, grant that our labors may bear fruit, not for us, but for you. Amen.*