

Luke 21:5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray, for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them.

"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified, for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately."

Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes and in various places famines and plagues, and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

"But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance, for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and siblings, by relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.*

People Prayers: Empowering the Church - November 13, 2022

Luke 21:5-19

We conclude our series on the Prayers of the People by discussing the beginning of the prayer. Each week when we pray, we begin with this petition:

Empower the church throughout the world in its life and witness. Break down the barriers that divide, that, united in your truth and love, the church may confess your name, share one baptism, sit together at one table, and serve you in one common ministry.

Now this may seem to be a ridiculous request nowadays. Empowering the church. What? Does the church have any power at all these days? If so, to do what? Friends, we are still in the throes of deciding what our government will look like. Many congressional seats have yet to be decided. Many candidates have yet to concede and those who seem to be losing are threatening to gum up the counting process in the courts.

As for the church, we know that Christians of all kinds have been offering prayers of all kinds. Some have prayed for specific candidates. Some have simply prayed for God's will to be done, regardless of candidate and party. Some have prayed for angels to swoop down from heaven and reprogram computers and voting machines. All in all, an outsider might ask whether all these prayers won't just cancel each other out.

I'm sure I don't need to remind you, friends, that when we pray, we are not casting spells to make our requests happen. Prayers that seem to request from God opposite outcomes do not cancel each other out like Harry Potter saying "Expelliarmus" versus Lord Voldemort's "Avada Kedavra." There are no jets of red and green light colliding in midair.

Rather, the act of praying is fundamentally an act of trust. When we pray, we are indeed opening our inmost selves to God by exposing our deepest needs and wants. That is always a good thing because by speaking our desires aloud, we remind ourselves of our priorities in life. Hundreds of thoughts pass through our minds every day. We can only focus on a few of them. The act of praying helps us narrow our focus because we select only those things we feel are most important to bring before God.

Yet as we pray, we must constantly remind ourselves that our prayer requests are not demands. They are not even wishes. Rather, they are simply open and honest confessions of where our minds and spirits are at a particular moment. Some pray almost challenging God to "come through" for them. They will pray long and hard for money, relationships, good health, or even for an Eagle's victory,

assuming that because of how hard they are praying God will be more persuaded to answer affirmatively.

Indeed, there are many places in scripture that urge us to pray and to pray without ceasing. But the act of prayer is a two-way street. Praying is not just our talking to God. True prayer requires us to listen for God and then act on what we discern.

Prayer is an act of trust. We cannot hear those words often enough. And the most fundamental, most trusting relationship we must have is in our relationship with God. Friends, the Biblical story centers around one truth: when God gives human beings a choice, they tend to choose the human way and not God's way. When we pray, no matter how often, no matter how hard, no matter how long, we must trust in God's way and God's will. Does God answer our prayers exactly the way we want? Rarely yes, 100%. Mostly, we receive some portion of what we want and yes, sometimes the answer is a complete, flat, "No."

What then, has God failed us? Have we failed God? Neither is true. When we make prayer an act of trust, instead of a list of demands, then we are better able to accept God's answers, whatever they may be, and then make the most out of them.

As Jesus was concluding his earthly ministry, his disciples were expecting it to close with end of the world. While none of the disciples understood Jesus and his message completely, they knew enough to realize Jesus' way was profoundly different from the way of the world. They understood that Jesus' message could not co-exist forever with the way the world was working. It was therefore natural for disciples to conclude that Jesus' vision for the world would soon become the new reality for people, and not the messed-up inhuman existence they had under the Roman Empire.

Imagine their surprise, therefore, when Jesus told them that the end was not near at all. The disciples asked Jesus for signs of the end times and certainly Jesus gave them a list. There would be wars between nations. There would be earthquakes, famines, and plagues. There would be reports of false messiahs popping up here and there.

In other words, the world Jesus described back then is the same world of today! Don't we have wars between nations in our own day? Don't we have plenty of earthquakes, famines, plagues, floods, fires, hurricanes, global warming and every other natural disaster you care to think of? Haven't false messiahs haunted humanity since forever? While it is upsetting that certain churches proclaim that some politicians are literally anointed and sent by God, it is not surprising.

One of the Confessions of our Presbyterian denomination is called the Barmen Declaration. Written in 1934, this document was written in a Germany where Adolf Hitler was demanding churches recognize Hitler as their leader, not Jesus Christ. The Declaration makes it clear that the Word of God is in fact only Jesus Christ and that Christ alone is the head of the church. The church should not be influenced by current politics and should not involve itself in the business of the state. Likewise the state should not interfere with the church.

The point is that it is not the task of the Church to tell the government how to do its job. We don't tell Presidents whether they should raise interest rates or how to conduct foreign policy.

However, our function is to testify to the life and words of Jesus Christ and to not shy away from contrasting Jesus' world view with the policies of any organization. Jesus, for example, made it clear that we are to care for widows and orphans. We feed the hungry, we clothe the naked, we care for the sick, we befriend outcasts and strangers. To the extent the government promotes these goals, the church freely supports it. But to the extent that the government ignores the poor, widows, orphans, and strangers — to the extent that the government ignores the hungry, sick, naked — the church according to Jesus has the obligation to speak up and speak out just as he did during his ministry.

Jesus did not die on the cross because he was harmless. Jesus did not die on the cross because he was just some random person they picked out of a lineup. No Jesus died because his actions and words directly opposed both the religious leaders of his day and ran counter to the oppressive ways the Roman government dominated people.

Jesus, in short, was a threat to the established world and so he had to die.

Jesus told his followers, "...they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify." What does that mean? If we are serious about following Jesus, it means that there will be things we say and do in Jesus' name that will make people upset.

When we ask God to, "Empower the Church, throughout the world in its life and witness," we are asking God to give us as congregations and as individual followers of Jesus Christ the vision and the courage to proclaim Jesus through our actions and in our words. We, Collingswood Church, are doing so right now with the sign hanging on our fence. Do you know of any other church in our area with something similar? If others aren't doing so, why not?

Friends, let me be clear. More important than our worship, more important than the music, more important than the fellowship among us is our central unswerving devotion to follow Jesus Christ and therefore show the world what he has taught us by whatever we do and whatever we say.

Praying is an act of trust because we trust that God knows us, loves us, and has a plan for us which is better than we can devise for ourselves. Therefore if we are willing to trust God through the act of praying, why should we not also trust God by following God's way as demonstrated in the life of Jesus? By praying to God, we are saying that we are willing to turn our lives over to God and accept God's answer and guidance for our lives, no matter what it is. Therefore we should be willing to act and speak out in God's name.

Clearly, Jesus guides us to follow his way. Jesus guides us to speak his truth. Jesus guides us to care for the least, last, and lost wherever they are. And Jesus promises guidance whenever we, as will happen, whenever we get into trouble for speaking and acting in His name.

That is what empowerment, true empowerment is about, friends. We are empowered — note the word "power" — we are empowered when we as a church and as individuals show the world how different Jesus' way is from the world's way and calling the world to surrender its slavish devotion to human ideas and instead focus on fulfilling God's will and God's purpose on earth.

Will we get in to trouble for doing so? Jesus did, why won't we? Will we have to say difficult things? Jesus did, why won't we? Will we have to defy our families, friends, employers, and government leaders? Jesus did, why won't we?

This is the path we are on. The path of Christ. It is not easy. But we are not alone. We have the assurance from Jesus that he "will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict." Jesus starkly reminds us, "You will be hated by all because of my name."

So why should we be doing this? Isn't it easier to keep silent? Isn't it easier to just let the world have its way? Shouldn't we just "go with the flow?" We can't. You can't and I can't. We are called all of us to be Christ's Church. We are called not to sit on the sidelines but to do something in this world. We are called to pray, act, and make a difference using the gifts with which God has blessed us. We are here, in short, to change the world.

And what does Jesus say to us? "But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.