

**SERMON**  
**“Pray against indifference”**  
**Stephan Scharf**  
**17<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost, September 19, 2010**  
**St John’s Chapel, UCC**

**1 Timothy 2:1-7**

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.

This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all-- this was attested at the right time.

For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

**Isaiah 58:1-14**

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

"Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to ADONAY? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of ADONAY shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and ADONAY will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the

needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. ADONAY will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

## **Pray for all people – really for all!? Why? Can we?**

If you think about your prayer life, what do you, what do we pray for?

Well, I guess thanking for God's provisions for us is a major one, thanking for food, our health, our spouse, our children, our parents and so forth. We pray and plead for ourselves in misery and for others we know, we intercede on behalf of others, maybe we even have lists of prayer requests, naming people who we lift up in prayer. As a church family we might have each other in mind when we pray too. If you take the time and would pray for all the people and issues that you are aware of needing prayer, you could probably spend a good portion of your day on your knees.

Now, the author of Timothy admonishes to pray for all, and then lists supplication, prayer, thanksgiving and intercession for all, and then especially for the people in authority. For all, and covering all aspects of their lives – thankfulness, pleading, help. If we think just about the number of people on the planet – billions, right- how should we cover that? It is not possible! We do not even know what their needs are. But even more difficult than the numbers: really all? I mean it is easy and good to pray for our loved ones. It may already be harder if we extend that to our family, or to our church family – but really for all?

For all, does that include the ones I do not like, the ones who are strange, the ones that are mean to me, the ones that have only bad intentions for me; people of nations that we are at odds or even at war with, the soldiers of opposing armies? There are dictators and violators of all we consider humane and good – do we pray for them too? Must we extend to all the same consideration and concern in prayer that we have for our closest family or friends? How and why should we possibly be asked to do that? Our text gives this answer: it is God's way to desire salvation for all, it is because of Jesus Christ, who is the ransom for all. God is God of and for all humans, there is no limit in grace or in compassion – like last week's parable of the Good shepherd reminded us, God's wish to seek out everybody exceeds our human understanding, it is radically universal and radically inclusive, and it is sublimely visible in the ministry of Jesus.

These are two sides of a coin: prayer and the reminder of God's perspective, God's being, as the basis of prayer. If the second is missing, we are left asking like the people in our Isaiah text: "Why do we fast – or in our case pray- but you do not see me? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice." The mere religious act, even honestly meant, can miss the mark of addressing God's concerns. The spiritual practice, the seeking of God in fasting and prayer that does not bear fruit in acts of love and justice falls short. The God-seeking community in Isaiah had to be reminded of God's universal benevolent intent and so did the young church in the letter to Timothy.

## **Glenn Beck's "Restoring honor" rally**

As I was meditating on today's sermon text, I could not help but read the news with these two sides of the text in the back of my mind: pray for all and with the knowledge of God's intent as guideline.

One of the headlines I stumbled over was the "restoring honor" rally in Washington on August 28, organized by Glenn Beck. Well, I have to admit that I did not know what I was in for, since I have not come across that name prior to this and since I am still a bit fresh here. So I watched the whole thing on the internet, the news headlines after all indicated it was about turning the nation to God, to return to prayer – maybe I would learn something. It is probably because I just moved here 4 months ago, but I felt a bit like a tourist who accidentally got on a crazy tour through Washington, with a slightly overexcited guide. My guide's initial assurance that this is not a political rally left me a bit skeptical - not only because I now know that in his day time job earns his money as a political commentator but because we cannot help it that our religious beliefs also have a political dimension.

But anyways, as this speech really got started, I got my money's worth of American history, values and principles. Beck urged a return to God and American values, stressing heavily on the freedom, power and responsibility of the individual, honor and integrity and the pioneer spirit. As his witnesses he invoked Washington, Lincoln, Martin Luther King and in sight of the war memorials constantly referred to the past and present armed forces. In the end he invited representatives of many faiths to the stage. His prayer program "faith, hope, charity" focused on the individual relationship with God and the importance of family which in return will be beneficial to the whole country.

I found myself watching the speech with an odd sense of mentally saying: "yes, good, yes, but...". "Pray for all, keeping in mind the knowledge of the God who desires salvation for all" –I was not sure what to make of Beck's speech in that context. So I did what a good tourist does: I looked up the extra reading list that the guide suggested, and there I found the reason for my lingering feeling of "yes, but". My guide left out some of the best parts in his tour, or somehow just gave me fragments.

It was most obvious whenever he referred to Martin Luther King to stress the values of liberty and equality. Beck is right in putting this brave man in the tradition of the founding fathers, no doubt, and no doubt his and their strife for liberty and equality is fueled by faith in and prayer to God. But as I read Martin Luther King's Washington speech, I – the baffled tourist – must find that for Dr. King poverty was the major sign for the inequality of African-Americans. Dr. King's

understanding of equality included a need to achieve social equality; that a true and just equality could only be accomplished by a change in the economic situation. Strange, Beck did not mention that. Surely though he must share that same notion, after all he called Martin Luther King a giant. But in reading up on Beck's thoughts on his website I was only finding that he labels this notion "socialism" and that of course cannot be good. So what now? My question for today is not the political implication. I am still trying to find out to what sort of God Beck urges us to pray to. I am sure, having read texts like Isaiah 58, that Martin Luther King did not derive his vision from any political theory, but from the God who seeks justice over empty religious practices:

*"To loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover them."*

I read yesterday that an estimated 40 million Americans live in poverty, and praying to a justice seeking God, I cannot help but feel that a call to turn to God in prayer that focuses only on individual freedom, individual transformation and individual charity – good and necessary as it is in itself – is also in danger of falling short in the sight of God's justice. If we pray for all, even limit our prayers to all people living in America, we won't be indifferent when it comes to addressing their needs. Should we then not also examine and adjust our society's structure when it promotes injustice?

In my search to clarify this "yes, but" feeling I also read up on President Lincoln's 2<sup>nd</sup> inaugural address. Beck praised this text especially in his talk, but upon reading it, I did not find its full spirit in his speech. You will know Lincoln's address better than me, but allow me to read to you the passages which struck me most:

*"Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. (...) The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes"*

In a time of horrible war, neighbors against neighbors, and still holding on to the conviction that this war is necessary to eradicate the evil of, hoping and praying that "this mighty scourge of war" will end quickly, Lincoln sees past the division, and with a sense of the prayer for all, he ends his address:

*"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."*

That is what I looked for, praying for all, praying against indifference, praying against hate – especially in a time of war, “for a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

However, that was missing from Beck’s speech. Especially in the parts when he came to the praise for the honor of the armed forces it lacked the spirit of Lincoln’s words.

I enjoyed the privilege to grow up in a free Germany because of the sacrifices these soldiers made. I am thankful for that and understand the necessity for an army’s protection. Still, whenever I hear someone ask for prayer, praise and blessing for the troops I wish to God I would also hear a prayer like Lincoln’s; of concern for people on both sides, a prayer that has the overcoming of that conflict at heart.

I wonder what would happen today if we could apply this kind of prayer to America’s present conflicts, to the present opponents in war and the innocents that are afflicted by it. If we had the same longing for reconciliation in our prayers, would we act differently? Would we see past our anger and frustration over a long conflict and could work out ways to establish a just and lasting peace, because we understand the suffering that war causes for both sides. I have no simple answer to that, but to set my hope on God.

“I urge you to pray for all” I did not hear it in what was offered in Washington, and it was sorely missing. Now you may think that I am harping on that point, but let me tell you why this is so important.

### **A German example**

Reading our sermon text I was instantly reminded of a passage in another text:

“We accuse ourselves for not standing to our beliefs more courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously, and for not loving more ardently.”

It is a quote from a declaration in which the leaders of the Evangelical Church in Germany tried to express their remorse over the part the church had in letting the Nazi reign happen and thus sharing implicitly in the responsibility for years of warfare and destruction and the death of millions.

Painfully the church had realized, - too late and still too reluctantly – that if you forget how to include all human beings in your prayer, you will become indifferent to those you leave out. And if you are indifferent to their concerns and their needs and sufferings, it is just so easy to accept or even to participate in the atrocities committed against them - fellow citizens and people from other nations alike. Rounding up and killing Jews, Sinti and Roma, political dissidents, homosexuals, physically and mentally handicapped; waging war against almost all nations and peoples of Europe and starting a worldwide whirlwind of death - You can do that when you have become indifferent.

The most disturbing thing is that Christians watched, tolerated, enabled and participated in those crimes with their actions and prayers. You have to wonder at the cynical absurdity of writing “Gott mit uns”, God with us” on the belt buckle of German soldiers when they marched to war. Is it really God just because you call it so?

With this declaration the Evangelical Church started the process of acknowledging its share of the guilt in not having prevented this evil.

Many of them who felt the guilt most keenly had opposed the Nazi influence over the church vehemently and had formed the so called “Confessing Church”. They based their resistance on the universal one God, and the one mediator Jesus Christ; on the idea that no ideology, no other authority, no national pride shall be added to that.

Yet, why a confession of guilt? They realized that even in their struggle for the church, they had neglected to see what else was at stake. They did not address the deportation and murder of Jews and countless others. Their opposition against the Nazis was often limited to church matters – exceptions existed, but there was no united church opposition. They did not pray hard enough, did not put the knowledge of the universal God into prayer, did not pray universally, so they were indifferent to what they did not allow themselves to see.

Prayer without the perspective of the God, whose love, compassion and universal saving intent for all humanity and all creation we confess to be visible in the one mediator Jesus Christ, is in danger of becoming idol worship, of putting something that is not God as the object of our prayer.

The mere knowledge of God without ardent prayer that transforms our perception and actions is in danger to lead to indifference to the actual needs and concerns of our fellow humans.

Both sides of the coin are needed.

## **Conclusion**

Having failed so horribly has become – to borrow from Jeff Whitman’s sermon – part of my church’s ancestral inheritance and it is why I was insisting on that prayer for all.

Therefore, yes it is true: America needs prayer – just as any other nation and people does, like we ourselves do. But I wish I had heard more of that kind of prayer for all on that August day in Washington. Yet my guided tour was not without benefits. In reading up on the American past, I found that the prayers of truly great Americans of history have more to teach us. Thus I want to recall the last words from President Eisenhower’s farewell address.

“We pray that people of all faiths, all races, all nations, may have their great human needs satisfied; that those now denied opportunity shall come to enjoy it to the full; that all who yearn for freedom may experience its full spiritual blessings. Those who have freedom will understand, also, its heavy responsibility; that all who are insensitive to the needs of others will learn charity; and that the scourges of poverty, disease, and ignorance will be made to disappear from the earth; and that in the goodness of time, all peoples will come to live together in a peace guaranteed by the binding force of mutual respect and love.”

Now that is what I call a prayer for all, a prayer to overcome indifference – right and acceptable in the sight of God.

**And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.**