

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Nonpartisan God

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Many of you may still be feeling the impact of last Tuesday's election. Not just in a political or ideological sense, but in an emotional, psychological, and even physical sense as well. If so, you could be recovering from what the American Psychological Association calls "election stress disorder." During the days and weeks leading up to November 8, millions of people experienced an intense concern about the outcome of the election. In some cases, this concern took the form of heart palpitations, shortness of breath, sweaty palms, loss of appetite, trouble sleeping, and a sinking or doomed feeling. Even in cases where these physical symptoms weren't present, many people still endured additional stress about the campaign process and election day itself. This included Democrats and Republicans, and people of all age groups. One person even wrote about how her kindergartner woke up with nightmares about "two people running for president."¹

The early Christians didn't have to deal with election stress disorder. There were no elections to stress about. They didn't have the right to vote. They didn't have freedom of speech. They didn't have access to the media. They couldn't flood Twitter with messages criticizing the emperor. They couldn't take to the streets in protest. They couldn't march to Rome chanting, "Drain the swamp!" But one thing they could do was pray. Today's Scripture passage opens with the writer saying, "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority. . . (vv. 1-2).

When the folks in these small house churches gather, they should use every form of prayer available to them. And not just so they can pray for a particular subgroup in society, but for everyone. In this case, praying for their political leaders is just one example of how believers should pray broadly. They shouldn't be interceding only for those who agree with them and share their beliefs. They shouldn't be giving thanks only for those who have the same racial or ethnic background. They shouldn't be petitioning God only for the things that will benefit themselves. No, they should be praying in ways that express Christian concern for everyone.

Granted, the outcome of their prayers can help create space and security for them to practice their beliefs and cultivate their community of faith. They're to pray for those in authority so that "we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (v. 2). But notice that the way they pray is supposed to be grounded, more than anything, in the character and purpose of God. "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (vv. 3-4). So believers should be praying, in every way they know how, for everyone they know, because of God's concern for everyone and his saving grace toward everyone.

No one knew this better than Paul himself, whose memory of transformation is preserved earlier in 1 Timothy: "The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and

receive eternal life" (1:14-16). What God has done in Christ is good news for Paul, good news for each of us, and good news for everyone. Good news to be proclaimed and believed and embodied.

One of the ways we embody this gospel is by our commitment to be a positive force in and for society, including our involvement in its political life. You had one opportunity to do that earlier this week by casting your vote. As we hear in today's text, another way to demonstrate concern for everyone, and to contribute to the common good, is by praying. That includes praying for those in authority.

You may not recognize the name Emma Daniel Gray. She died on June 8, 2009, at the age of 95. For 24 of those years she was the woman who cleaned the office of the President of the United States. She served six presidents until she retired in 1979. Each night, as she came to the president's chair, she would pause, cleaning supplies in hand, and say a quick prayer. In her prayer, she would ask for blessings, wisdom, and safety. When she died, Gray's pastor, bishop Royce Woods, said of her, "She saw life through the eyes of promise. . . . You can always look around and find reasons to be [unhappy] . . . but you couldn't be around her and not know what she believed. She always believed there was a higher power to grab on to that would lift you above any circumstance, and she was always able to do that."² Relying on the power of God, seeing life through the eyes of promise, and praying accordingly. That's a good description of how we as believers should approach the events and circumstances of life, whether in our own house or in the White House.

Speaking of someone's death, and reflections on their life, I recently came across a quirky obituary that's been getting a lot of attention. It was for Mary Anne Noland, a feisty woman who died at age 69 after a long battle with lung cancer. The obituary's opening line read: "Faced with the prospect of voting for either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton, Mary Anne Noland of Richmond chose, instead, to pass into the eternal love of God on Sunday, May 15, 2016." Noland's family said the obituary wasn't meant to be a political statement, but simply an attempt to capture her spirit and sense of humor.

If you didn't know better, you would think that's the ultimate form of political disengagement. Better to enter the hereafter than to choose between the available candidates in the here and now. But we know that for those of us who are still on this side of the grave, the gospel is still good news for all of life, including our ongoing engagement with contemporary culture and politics. Remember that the admonition in today's Scripture passage isn't a call for us to head for the hills and forsake any involvement with the life of our society. True, as I've indicated, things were different for those first Christians. They weren't living in a modern Western democracy. They were focused primarily on the struggle to survive, particularly in the face of government suspicion and hostility. For them, just securing the basic social space they needed to grow in godliness was a major goal. But they didn't let these realities keep them from following the call to live within the world for the sake of the gospel and for the good of others, no matter who those others were or what their place was in society. For Christians, then and now, all our neighbors, both high and low, are the objects of God's concern.

Because we believe that there's one God, and one mediator between him and us, Jesus Christ, who gave himself to secure freedom for everyone held captive by sin, our approach isn't about retreat from but engagement with the world where God's will is to save. Of course, exactly what that engagement with society looks like, and how to go about it, can vary, depending on the particular Christian, or group of Christians, involved. But wherever you come down on the specifics of method, there's certainly plenty of agreement on the conviction that politics, in and of itself, cannot save us. Those who are in authority, while they represent us and act for us and with us, remain elected human leaders, not messiahs. They can definitely help lead us further in the direction of justice and peace, but they cannot

bring about the reign of God. That's why, in today's text, the only one called Savior is God, in and through Jesus Christ.

As followers of Christ, our identity, individually and together, has to be grounded in him, and in the community of his people. One woman tells how on a Sunday morning, while she was brushing her nine-year-old daughter's hair, the young girl was peppering her with questions. She was doing her best to answer them when the girl looked up and asked, "Are we Christians or Republicans?" Now just to assure you that I'm bipartisan in my sermon humor, there's another story from a man who was leading some music during junior church one Sunday morning. The song included the line, "He has conquered every foe." When the man saw a number of puzzled expressions, he explained that a foe is an enemy. Still thinking on his feet, he said, "The name of one of our foes begins with the letter D." Though he was referring to the Devil, he got some immediate insight into one family's politics when a child replied, "Oh, you mean the Democrats!" One of the great dangers in today's cultural climate is that we define ourselves by our politics. Or we claim the name of Christ exclusively for one particular party or policy, and demonize other perspectives and positions. As believers, our primary identity label isn't Republican or Democrat, or even American, though there can be good in all those things. Our primary identity is Christian.

For our spiritual ancestors, the early Christians, their desire to "live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" wasn't an attempt to be secretive or to withdraw from the world. It was a commitment to learning and cultivating and practicing the traditions of the faith, the things that give focus and meaning to our witness in the world. That way, who we are, and what we're doing, stay anchored in Christ. Author Michael Wear points out that a lot of the bitter partisanship and hostile division in our society comes from the fact that so many of us Americans stake our identity on our political views, our party affiliation, and our bond with people whose ideology matches ours. As Wear puts it:

The future of faith in American politics depends on Americans understanding that it is not healthy to engage in politics with our feet planted in politics. Politics is not a foundation that can bear the weight of our best aspirations. The safest place to engage in politics is with our feet planted firmly in the gospel, allowing our spiritual needs to be met by God, and thus being freed up to engage in politics in pursuit of the well-being of our neighbors and communities.³

So when you think about how to engage the larger culture, how to be involved in our nation's political life, and how to contribute to the common good, think not only about Capitol Hill, the Supreme Court, or the White House. Think also of your own house. Think of your own sphere of influence. Think of your own immediate territory. Pay attention to your own heart, your own home, your own neighborhood, and your own community. At a time when so much of our attention has been riveted on electing leadership at the national level, remember that one of the most important, yet overlooked, things you can do is live out your faith at the local level, moment by moment, day by day. Stay connected to the lives of your family and friends. Stay active in the life of your church, where you can cultivate your Christian identity and stay grounded in the gospel. Stay alert and open to every way that you can love God and love your neighbor, practicing peace, growing in holiness, and demonstrating God's nonpartisan concern for all.

¹ Deborah Netburn, "Feeling Anxious about the Election? Here's How to Cope with Election Stress Disorder." Los Angeles Times website. November 4, 2016. Accessed November 10, 2016 <<http://www.latimes.com/science/sciencenow/la-sci-sn-election-stress-disorder-20161104-story.html>>.

² Patricia Sullivan, "A Local Life: Emma Daniel Gray Cleaner, 'Christian Lady' Served 6 Presidents." Washington Post website. June 21, 2009. Accessed November 10, 2016 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/20/AR2009062001661.html>>.

³ Michael Wear, "There's Still Hope for Our Politics." Christianity Today website. November 8, 2016. Accessed November 10, 2016 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/november-web-only/theres-still-hope-for-our-politics.html>>.