# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“For Whom Should We Pray?”**

**1 Timothy 2:1-4**

 **March 6, 2022**

This morning we begin with the Old Testament story of Jonah, a prophet of God. You can read the story in the book of Jonah and fill in the details; it’s only four brief chapters long. The Lord speaks to Jonah and tells him to go to the city of Nineveh to speak to them of the judgment of God because of their sin. Now, Nineveh is to the north-east of where Jonah lives, but he goes in the opposite direction, to the port city of Joppa. There he books passage on a ship leaving for Tarshish, a town on the war western shores of the Mediterranean Sea, essentially as far as one can possibly get from Nineveh. He does not want to do what God has asked of him.

But, God brings a powerful storm, the ship is in danger of sinking, and Jonah is thrown overboard. Instead of drowning, God causes a giant fish to swallow Jonah and he is inside the fish for three days and three nights. Jonah prays to God from inside the fish. You can read his wonderful prayer in chapter two, but essentially he says: “Get me out of here.” And the Lord causes the fish to spit Jonah out onto the beach.

Again God says to Jonah, “Go to Nineveh and deliver my message to them.” This time Jonah obeys. He preaches God’s message in Nineveh, the people believe the message, and from the king down to the lowest servant they all repent of their sin. When God sees their repentance, he does not carry out the destruction of the city that he had threatened because of their sin.

This greatly upsets Jonah, and he becomes very angry. He complains to the Lord that this is exactly why he had not wanted to go to Nineveh in the first place. The people of Nineveh are a wicked people, the enemies of his people, the Jews, and enemies of the true God. But, he knows that God is a merciful and compassionate God, eager to turn away from destroying people. Instead of giving them what they deserve, God uses Jonah to show mercy to them. Mercy for people Jonah hated, people he believed were undeserving of mercy, people not at all like him and his fellow Jews.

Are there people in our lives, in our community, in our nation, in our world, that we don’t believe deserve the mercy of God? Are there people that we would rather see God destroy than save? I invite you to turn with me to 1 Timothy 2:1-4 where we continue our journey through this letter written by Paul to the young pastor Timothy in Ephesus

I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth.

For whom should we pray? We can answer that question with the answer to this question: For whom does God desire salvation and understanding of the truth? All people – everyone. So, we should pray for all people. This does not mean all people without exception. There are almost eight billion people in the world, and we would never be able to pray for each person even if we tried. What Paul means is that we need to pray for all kinds of people, without distinction. Jonah did not want to preach the message of God to a certain kind of people, but God told him to do so anyway because God desires for all kinds of people to hear the message about himself. And, implies Paul, there may be certain kinds of people that we don’t want to pray for, like kings and those who are in authority. They may not be godly people; they may even by persecutors of God’s people, but pray for them anyway. In Paul’s day, the king was the emperor Nero, who had already launched a persecution against Christians and during whose reign, we believe, Paul was martyred for his faith. Pray for that kind of person? Yes, pray for them, for that is good and pleases God.

When you pray for a king, for a world leader, you are acknowledging that there is a higher authority than that person. To pray for a king means to pray that he will govern well under God’s authority, that he will act in ways that allow people, to use Paul’s words, “to live peaceful and quiet lives.” Under God, that is the role of government and that is the responsibility of those who lead nations. The preamble to the Constitution of the United States expresses the role of our American government:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

The role of the government is to create peace; to keep things running smoothly; to establish a functional society so that people can go about their lives. To pray for kings is to pray that God will be at work in and through them to do just that. Pray for all kinds of people, even kings and those in authority. Do I need to mention the names of those in the White House, past and present, who should be prayed for, or the name of a certain world leader doing terrible and ungodly things in Ukraine?

Pray for all kinds of people. Pray for kings and rulers, pray for people on the other side of the political spectrum from you, pray for people whose expression of faith is different from yours or for people who express no faith at all, pray for people you know very well, perhaps even in your family or at work or in your neighborhood, with whom you are not seeing eye to eye right now. Pray for all kinds of people.

Ask God to help them. Perhaps there is some way that you can get directly involved in God’s work in their lives. Or, it could be that what they need is outside your sphere of influence. It could even be that what they need only God can provide. And, give thanks for them. Be grateful that they are a part of your world and that God is using them, and your prayer for them, to enable you to see the world as it really is and to live in that world with gracious dignity. When you pray for the government, for the world, for friends and for those in need, you begin to see the world from God’s perspective, and that will enable you to be better used of God to bring his grace and mercy to all kinds of people.