

GRASPING FOR MUCH-NEEDED GRACE:
Twenty Days of Nonpartisan Prayer in a Polarized Political Season
Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ
Fall 2020

At a time when our nation and society are deeply divided—so much so that democracy itself seems under threat—the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ invites you to a time of fervent prayer. **For the twenty days preceding the 2020 presidential election, we urge you to join in this intensive prayer initiative** as we daily petition God for wisdom, patience, courage, healing, and peace.

We are providing a “prayer prompt” or daily devotional for each day of this twenty-day undertaking. Feel free to share these devotionals with others and encourage others to join in this time of prayer. We need it.

Day 1 (October 15, 2020)	II Chronicles 7:14	Paul Eyer
Day 2 (October 16, 2020)	Psalms 46:4	Leigh McCaffrey
Day 3 (October 17, 2020)	Proverbs 29:18	Paul Sangree
Day 4 (October 18, 2020)	Psalms 137:1-4	Mark Mendes
Day 5 (October 19, 2020)	Ephesians 3:17-19	Susie Webster-Toleno
Day 6 (October 20, 2020)	I Thessalonians 2:1-6	Cordelia Burpee
Day 7 (October 21, 2020)	Proverbs 6:16-19	Doug Cameron
Day 8 (October 22, 2020)	Hebrews 10:24-25	Barbara Purinton
Day 9 (October 23, 2020)	Psalms 147:3	Scott Couper
Day 10 (October 24, 2020)	Philippians 2:2	Matt Deen
Day 11 (October 25, 2020)	Philippians 4:4-7	Ted Marcy
Day 12 (October 26, 2020)	Mark 1:14-15	Ken White
Day 13 (October 27, 2020)	Psalms 139:7-12	Cary Friberg
Day 14 (October 28, 2020)	Micah 4:4	Kimberly McKerley
Day 15 (October 29, 2020)	Romans 8:26-27	Amanda Swoyer
Day 16 (October 30, 2020)	Matthew 6:28-30	Katherine Arthaud
Day 17 (October 31, 2020)	John 1:3	Mark Daniel Wilson
Day 18 (November 1, 2020)	Matthew 5:1-12	Tracy Weatherhogg
Day 19 (November 2, 2020)	Matthew 22:15-22	Ed Sunday-Winters
Day 20 (November 3, 2020)	Deuteronomy 30:19	Lynn Bujnak

Romans 8:26-27

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Tucked away in the beauty of this New England October I feel blessed to be able to arise and look out at my peaceful surroundings. I try to imagine, just for a moment, that the whole world is this beautiful and this calm. But that is only a dream and most of us are unable to stay with that for any length of time these days. As the election draws near in this year that has already been like a terrifying roller coaster ride, we try to catch our breath before the next too fast curve or drop off.

Paul’s letter to the Romans says that *the whole creation has been groaning in pains of childbirth right up to the present time. (Rom 8:22)* The struggles in our world are nothing new. There has always been death and disease, oppressors and the oppressed, rich and poor and people who make themselves feel strong and important by trying to make others feel like less than they really are. And we know there have always been dreamers too, who believe this world can be better, that we can be better, and we can make a difference if we stay engaged and involved, work hard and pray harder. We keep trying because it matters. We keep praying because that makes a difference too.

All creation is groaning as we dare to hope for those things unseen, hope for a world free from pandemic, hope for an election that is honest and leaders and citizens who all truly want us to be united, hope for acceptance no matter who we are, hope that our children and loved ones will always be safe. I know mine is a dream built on hope and faith. I believe when there are times that we have no words left to pray we can trust that the Spirit will step in for us with sighs too deep for words.

When it feels like life is out of control and the world has gone mad, we can stop, be still, and pray. It may not change the world, but it can change us. If we can only change the world one heart at a time let’s start with our own.

Prayer:

Holy One, when my heart is breaking, and I feel empty and have no words left in me to pray I know that I can count on You to send the Spirit to intercede. Together may we pray with sighs too deep for words; breathe in, breathe out. Together may we pour out all of our pain and sorrow and make room for new hope. Amen

Rev. Amanda Swoyer serves as pastor of the North Pomfret Congregational Church, United Church of Christ in North Pomfret, Vermont.

Day 16 (October 30, 2020)

by Rev. Katherine Arthaud

Scripture focus

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? (Matthew 6:28-30, NRSV)

Reflection

A couple of weeks ago, I took a day off to drive across the lake to play tennis with some old friends at a lodge in the Adirondacks. It was a sparkingly beautiful day—blue sky, golden leaves, glistening lake, hardly a cloud in the sky. Somewhat uncharacteristically, I arrived at my destination quite early, but when I tried to text my friends to tell them that I was there, I found that there was no service. Not even a little. So I wandered up to a grassy knoll that looked out over the valley, and took in the glorious autumn colors, the craggy mountain face in the distance, and watched as a hawk soared across the sky. It was breathtakingly beautiful. And peaceful. Then I walked back to the empty tennis courts and waited on a bench in the sun. There was not a human being to be seen. At one point a monarch butterfly fluttered by, hovering for a moment near my ankles before taking off to do whatever butterflies do on a sunny fall day. Had I known I was going to be doing any waiting, I would have brought a book or some knitting—and lacking any of those things, would have played around with my phone, checking emails, texts, Facebook, etc., you know the drill. But I had no book, no wool, and zero service. So I just sat there, enjoying the day, enjoying being in my body, basking in the

warm sun, breathing in the mountain air. Eventually my friends showed up and we played three sets of tennis, and then, as the sky began to dim, I headed home. Of course, once back on the other side of the lake, my phone started lighting up with text messages—all the stuff that had been piling up during the time I was out of range—many of which contained some variation of “WHERE ARE YOU?!?!” Two were from my kids. I called them back. As it turned out, they had been worried when they hadn’t heard from me, and also, both had had pretty challenging days. I spoke with them, and then continued on my way. Now, probably a number of you reading this are parents yourselves, and so will understand when I say that, typically, hearing that two of my children were unhappy(ish) would have rattled me, or at least eroded my own sense of well-being to some degree. But on *this* day, I found that after talking to them and hearing their woes, I was just as serene and grateful in my heart as I had been when that orange and black butterfly flitted about the bench where I sat in the afternoon sunlight. I was impermeably happy. Safe, content, and well in my soul.

Prayer

Thank you, God, thank you, for the times we get to bask in your love and the beauty and joy of this dazzling creation. Thank you for the friendships that shore and buoy us up in this life, that fill our hearts with gladness and a sure and solid sense that we are loved and that we belong. Thank you for playfulness and miracles. Thank you for soaring birds, golden leaves, butterflies, sparkling lakes, and trees. Thank you for all the things, great and small, that remind us that there is a God and we are not it. That, like the lilies, we are beautiful and well and cared for, that we lack for nothing. Seriously: thank you. Amen.

Rev. Katherine Arthaud serves as pastor of the United Church of Fairfax in Fairfax, Vermont.

Scripture Focus

"All things came into being through the Word, and without the Word not one thing came into being." - John 1:3

Reflection

I wasn't here that long when someone said, "Have they told you about Halloween?" They hadn't. Turns out I live on one of those roads that gets closed down on Halloween so the kids can trick or treat. The whole road gets into it; it's our yearly neighborhood street party. While this year's celebration is, of necessity, a little more safe and subdued than usual, it is still happening. I'm glad. I love Halloween. Behind the mask, it is our little not-quite-Christianized Samhain, a liminal space between the dead and the living, and, along with All Saints and All Souls, its own Triduum; its own inverted Easter. I love it when the kids come up to the candy I lay out on the table, always the good stuff - small, name-brand candy bars, no bargain lollipops, you know who you dum dums are - and perfunctorily shout "trick of treat!" And then I get to ask them who, or what, they are. (In the movie V for Vendetta, the protagonist comments on the paradox of asking a masked man who he is.) I love the kids that just silently reach for the candy while the other ones are talking away. They don't tell me who they are, so I don't ever know if they know. I don't make them talk. Unlike many holidays, Halloween isn't some forced family march. I let them have the candy anyway.

People are asking these days, "Is this the apocalypse?" I think yes, in the sense that the word means revealing or unveiling. It took a few different viruses, of which coronavirus is one, to unmask long-hidden dysfunctions in our lives: systemic racism, income and wealth inequality, and inequality in our healthcare system, to name a few. Masks may protect our identity, but masks also reveal who we are, and we wear them, mostly, I think, to try to scare off what scares us: our insecurities, our fears, our resentments, our selves. It was this night, after all, that Martin Luther, an unmasked anti-Semite, chose to start his Reformation; a time between what was, what is, and what will be.

These days find us in a similar time. We would do well to remember that no matter what's behind the mask of the future, all things came into being through the Word, and without It not one thing came into being. All things are holy; and all people are, too - yes, even him - no matter how many masks we wear to try to prove to ourselves, and others, otherwise. And, as Luther may have been pointing toward, even if he never fully made it there, all things and all people are redeemed. Yes, even him. If this isn't true, if you have to tell who you are to get the candy, then grace isn't grace. Whether or not we lift the mask, no matter what's under there, we're already forgiven. In Jesus, God laid out the good stuff for us to take freely, and be saved from what hides us from each other, and from ourselves. Once you come to understand that, believe it, trust it, know it, then the masks can start coming off, and the naming can begin. It's possible for everyone. Yes, even him.

Prayer

God known and unknown, hallowed be your name. Bidden or unbidden, you unmask me. Thanks for giving me the treat already, anyway, no matter what. Amen.

Mark Wilson is Pastor and Teacher at Waitsfield, Vermont, United Church of Christ

Scripture focus: *When Jesus^[a] saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*

³ *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

⁴ *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

⁵ *“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

⁶ *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

⁷ *“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

⁸ *“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

⁹ *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

¹⁰ *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

¹¹ *“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely^[b] on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Reflection: On this All Saints’ Day, the lectionary takes us to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes. As we remember and give thanks for those who have gone before us in faith, who have run the race, who have laid the foundation, and who have inspired, taught, and influenced us; these words remind us that following in Jesus’ way, although difficult and challenging, leads to blessing.

John Dear, author of *The Beatitudes of Peace: Meditations on The Beatitudes, Peacemaking, and The Spiritual Life*, writes about finding his way to the Chapel of the Beatitudes on a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee in Israel. It’s a small, circular church with a tall, gray dome, with the words of the Beatitudes written on the walls of the eight-sided church. Overcome by their message, Dear writes, “It dawned on me there and then that these words were the hope and prayer and vision of Jesus, and he was quite serious about them. They outlined the way Jesus wanted his followers to live. They were the blueprint for Christian discipleship, the job description of every Christian. Suddenly, I realized that this included me! These words demanded to be lived, and not by someone else, but at that moment, by me.”

We give thanks today for all those who have taken those words seriously and have attempted to live them in their lives. They are words that are demanding to be lived even now, today, by us, in our divided and contentious and anxious world. Those who take them seriously may find themselves not with the crowd, but instead set apart to live life differently ... but blessed! Contrary to the ways of the world, Jesus says those who are blessed are poor in spirit, meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted. At this moment in time, maybe especially now, we need a world filled with those who are seeking peace and are hungering and thirsting for righteousness, even

enduring persecution to follow in this way. May we be found among those following in this way!

Prayer: We give thanks, O God, for the saints who have followed in your way and received the blessings of your love and grace. Fill us with your vision of love and grace so that we, too, may be led to live a life of blessing, this day and always. Amen.

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“Belonging to God”

Day 19 (November 2, 2020)

by Ed Sunday-Winters

Scripture focus: . . .*Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’* (Matthew 22:21 NRSV)

Reflection: The verse above is the conclusion of Jesus reply to a question about paying taxes. The Pharisees are trying to trap him with a question about paying taxes to the emperor of Rome. Paying taxes to one's own country is more than some people want to do. Paying taxes to a foreign government that has invaded and currently occupies your country is something few, if any, of us would want to do. Yet, this is a situation in which residents of Judea find themselves in the time of Christ. Their country has been conquered by the mighty Roman Empire.

If Jesus gives an affirmative answer to the question about paying taxes to the emperor, the Pharisees will use his answer against him. But if he gives a negative answer he risks being arrested for inciting sedition. Neither of these outcomes is desirable.

When Jesus asked for a coin and inquires about whose image is on it, he moves this politically tense conversation in a more consequential direction. The image on the coin belongs to Caesar. If Caesar's image is on the coin, then give it to him

Jesus does not ask his questioners whose image is on them, but his response cannot help but make them think about it. He says, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

In the climax of the creation story found in Genesis chapter 1 that would have been familiar to Jesus questioners, verse 27 reads,

“So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.”

Those questioning Jesus and all the rest of us human beings are stamped with God’s image. God has made us God’s own. Following the intent of Jesus’ reply, we should not give to anyone that which belongs to God. Our civic duty compels us to vote for one candidate or another. Hopefully, we do that after a careful and thoughtful decision-making process. Jesus reply reminds us that God alone is worthy of the heart of us, the soul of us. There is no political party, candidate or country worthy of the worship and devotion that is due only to God.

In this election, devout people of all faiths and people who adhere to no religion will cast their ballots for Democrats, Republicans, independents and for third-party candidates. They will represent a broad diversity of thought, opinion, and outlook, but they will all have one thing in common. They will all be human beings created in the image of God. Everyone of them will be God’s beloved.

Regardless of the outcome of this election, that is an important truth for those of who seek to follow the one who calls us to meet our neighbors and our enemies with love.

Prayer: Holy God, give us love for our neighbors and our enemies. Open our eyes so we can see your image in all who come our way so that understanding and compassion may be the fruit of your love for us. Amen.

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Day 20 (Tuesday, Nov. 3)

“Choosing Life”

by Rev. Lynn Bujnak

Scripture Focus: *I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life that you and your descendants may live... (Deuteronomy 30:19 NRSV)*

Reflection: As we have prayed our way through these 20 days leading to today’s election, I hope you have found food for the journey, companions along the way and a deeper understanding of your faith. As we vote and then watch for the results, there is bound to be a great deal of tension, anxiety and uncertainty. We may very well not know who won the presidential election for some time.

In this passage from the book of Deuteronomy, the people whom God led out of slavery in Egypt have been wandering in the wilderness for a very long time. But now, they are on the verge of entering the Promised Land at last. This is part of Moses’ farewell speech. It was a time of great uncertainty for this small band of God’s followers. Moses is encouraging them to remember that God is always with them and there will be a future of promise if only they will choose what is life-giving and not death-dealing.

Regardless of who becomes our next president, we will still face choices about how we will go on from here. Will the choices, actions, speech and values we proclaim and live be imbued with life or death, filled with blessings or curses? As we walk through these next days and weeks, as the old hymn says, will they “know we are Christians (people of faith) by our love?”

Prayer: Gracious God, as the tension rises along with voices, when it is difficult to know the truth, when the future seems uncertain, remind us of your never-failing presence. Help us to choose life, for ourselves, for the whole human family and the for the earth. Amen.

Rev. Lynn Bujnak serves as the Conference Minister of the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ.