

United In Prayer

The discussions, arguments, and conflicts that have sprung up between people during this election year and, especially, during and regarding the pandemic has been disturbing to say the least. As we struggle, whether as spectators or participants in these conflicts, I invite you to consider Paul's words to Timothy (my own translation), along with these words from a project I've been working on:

"Therefore, I want the men to pray in every place, lifting holy/pure hands without wrath and disputing." 1 Timothy 2:8

As long as we live on this earth, can we ever live with truly holy/pure hands? Yes, but only as they have been washed and made pure in the blood of Jesus. Living so bathed in the blood of Christ, wrath is turned aside and arguing and disputing ceases, for Christ unites us into one: members of His One Body, the Church. In that Church, that Body, we lift up our prayers as one voice.

Have we such a concern for unity in our prayers today? Or do we instead pray 'together' as a group of individuals who happen to agree upon the same requests? And does it matter?

Like many other elements of our worship and life together, rampant individualism shatters our unity and, in this case, disrupts our prayers. Believers who try to live together with 'wrath and disputing' can focus neither on God nor on their requests to God. Instead, as soon as they look toward or even think about those in the assembly with whom they have quarrels, their thoughts are redirected away from God and toward sin. Petitions may even switch to imprecations. "I'll pray for that person who is in need, but I won't pray it with this person beside me whom I loathe. I don't need this person to join me in my prayer."

But I do. I need my fellow believers to join with me, and I with them, not because our petition is somehow made 'more powerful' when made by a larger number of people. I need them because the only way I can pray is as a part of the Body of Christ. If I have broken from that Body because of 'wrath and disputing,' then I have no right to bring my requests to God.

Prayer is an act of faith, and 'wrath and disputing' destroy faith. Reconcile to fellow believers first, then come before God together in prayer.

Here, the genius of our liturgy may go unappreciated. At the beginning of our service, we customarily confess our sins and receive Absolution. However, individualists that we are, we usually limit this forgiveness to a matter of "I am reconciled to God and God is reconciled to me." We forget, ignore, or neglect another important reconciliation that can take place when and because we are reconciled to God: through His forgiveness, we are enabled to be reconciled to one another.

Is this the point of Paul's previous verses, where he writes of how God wants all people to be saved, and that Jesus Christ is the ransom who made that possible? Prayer flows from our redemption in Christ, not simply 'my' redemption in Christ. Because 'we' are redeemed, 'we' can pray together. Unity of faith and unity in faith therefore produces unity in prayer. Thus pure hands are lifted in prayer, for those hands have been made pure in the blood of Jesus Christ.