

**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

**Scripture focus:** *If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (II Chronicles 7:14 NRSV)*

**Reflection:** This passage, with references to “sin” and “wicked ways,” has the potential to make people feel uncomfortable. And to be sure, there have been times when this scripture verse has been wielded as a weapon. There have been occasions when these stirring words have been misused to provide a veneer of political cover for labeling opponents as “wicked” and leveling accusations against others because they happened to be different.

This message of God comes in response to a prayer from King Solomon at the consecration of a newly-constructed house of worship, the Temple in Jerusalem three millennia ago. But today we offer prayers at a time when many of our own houses of worship are partially or fully empty as a consequence of a plague-like disease of biblical proportions.

If there was ever a time when our land was in need of healing, it is now. We need healing from the deadly impact of a frightening pandemic. We need healing from the sordid sickness of racism that continues to infect our society and our souls in ways we still don’t fully understand. We need healing from self-righteous arrogance that has led people across the spectrum to be contemptuous toward others who do not share their views of politics and society and faith. And we need healing from the potentially catastrophic consequences of failing to adequately care for the environment.

Perhaps it is time for us to reclaim the promise of this scripture passage. Perhaps it is time for us to turn again toward God. Perhaps, in a spirit of humility, it is time—even more fervently—to seek God’s face and to pray.

**Prayer:** O God, if there were ever a time when our land is in need of healing, it is now. So we humble ourselves, seek your face, and pray. Hear us, forgive us, and heal us. Amen.

*Rev. Paul Eyer serves as pastor of Williston Federated Church in Williston, VT.*

**Day 2 (Friday, October 16)**

**“The River”**

**by Rev. Leigh G. McCaffrey**

**Scripture focus:** *There is a river whose streams gladden God’s city, the holy dwelling-place of the Most High. God is in its midst, it will not be toppled; by daybreak, God will come to its aid. Nations rage, kingdoms topple; at the sound of His thunder the earth dissolves. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. – Psalm 46:4-7*

**Reflection:** In times of change, it is easy to worry that the institutions in which we have invested so much time and love will topple. The image of our democracy teetering on the brink of collapse seems much more real this year. When I worry that the church or our civic institutions or some group in which I am invested will just collapse under the weight of conflict or crisis, I am reminded of the river.

I envision the river not as a calm, quiet backwater, but as a raging torrent tumbling over rocks and tree limbs. This river is powerful and a little dangerous, but it brings joy and energy to the city of God. Rivers bring nutrients to their banks. Beneath the surface, rivers harbor frogs and salamanders, fish and bugs. At the water’s edge, wading birds and mammals hunt and forage for food. The river is a busy place.

It is this very busyness that gives me hope. Within the change that seems like such a threat is the very seed of survival. All that movement, above and below the surface of the water, is creating whatever will be the “new normal”. If I can see the ferment of these times - the strident voices and hardened positions and polarization - as a rearrangement of reality, it seems less scary. All the “stuff” that is coming to the surface of our society will be part of the future we create together. The structures may topple, but the river keeps running and makes the city glad. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

**Prayer:** Holy One, help us to see not only the threats around me, but also the river of your love. Nourish us with your Word, gladden our hearts with the movement of your Spirit, and comfort us with your Presence. We pray this while trusting in the power of the Risen Christ, who is always with us. AMEN.

*Rev. Leigh McCaffrey is the pastor and teacher of the Barre Congregational Church.*

## **Day 3 (Saturday, October 17)**

**by Rev. Paul Sangree**

**Scripture Focus:** *Where there is no Vision, the People Perish...* Proverbs 29:18a (KJV)

Every election is ultimately about the vision of the people. We in the churches of the Vermont Conference certainly know the power of vision. Our vision statement calls us to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves, and we know that people and churches are most fruitful in this world when we seek to do both these things. We know that Jesus fully embodied that vision, and that our churches can thrive when their leadership is focused on both preaching and living out the good news about Jesus in ways that connect with and make a difference in the community. We trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to help us be open to new ways of following our vision, and we all know that if we lose track of that vision, our people will lose our way.

And for us as a nation, we too need to live out our vision. Without it, we as a nation will perish. To discern our vision, we look to the founding documents of our country. Most famously, the prologue to the Declaration of Independence states that all people are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. The Constitution of our country also lays out much of our vision as a nation, as it lists our Bill of Rights and our structure of government. Obviously, we as a nation have often not lived up to our vision, but it always is there as a guide to who we want to be.

So on every election day, we as voters should pray for wisdom about which candidates will most help our nation follow our vision. And that is what we seek to do today, to ask God for help in deciding which candidates will best enable us to do that. And while we are at it, we also pray for our Conference, that we would follow our vision for God and be fruitful, to the glory of God.

**Prayer:** Loving God, we are grateful for our country, and we pray for its vision this election season. We pray that we will not perish because we have lost sight of Your vision for us. We also pray for the people and churches of the Vermont Conference, that we might joyfully follow the vision You have given us. Amen.

*Rev. Paul Sangree serves as the Associate Conference Minister of the Vermont Conference.*

## **Day 4 (Sunday, Oct. 18) “Worshipping in a Foreign Land” by Rev. Mark Mendes**

### **Scripture focus:**

*By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.*

*On the willows there we hung up our harps.  
For there our captors asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”*

*“How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”*

**Reflection:** Those of us who came to our faith in the 1960’s remember this biblical quote set to music in such a poignant way in the musical *Godspell*. There was a somber beauty to the tune that spoke to that generation of past injustice and future vision. As a child, one could easily understand the vision of what our country could become, but I did not sense our country being foreign.

The Hebrew deportees in Babylon and earlier those deported to Assyria were actually living in a foreign land. Everything about their lives changed not only on a day to day basis, but spiritually and religiously; how and where they worshipped, the structure and administration of religious institutions, how they understood God and the theological underpinnings....all changed as they struggled to deal with deportation, oppression and mockery. Instead of the temple, they went to the river to worship. In their struggle with the evil perpetrated upon them, they began to develop a more dualistic understanding of God, like the Babylonians. They lived among a foreign people where purity laws were less important and intermarriage more common, especially in Assyria.

Living through this coronavirus pandemic, I sometimes feel as if I am living in a foreign land, singing songs for the way things use to be. How we engage the world, commune with our families or even eat our food has changed drastically as well as how and where we worship, our understanding of God and the administration and structure of our churches. Like the Israelites by the river in Babylon who alternated between being reminiscent of life in Jerusalem or full of revenge for those responsible for their deportation; we too reminisce of pre-pandemic life or anger at anyone who disagrees with us about anything. We can all identify the groups in our own culture who gravitate to one of these extremes.

When Persia, in their enlightened, pluralistic outlook allowed the Israelites to return home, their leaders responded in different ways. Ironically, Ezra and Nehemiah both opted for

xenophobic nationalism in light of the Persian enlightenment, while other leaders followed the Persian example and used the correctives of Jonah, Ruth and Isaiah's vision of a Holy Mountain to inspire the people to a more inclusive and loving community.

Stressful times amplify our differences and what was true on the banks of the river in Babylon and during Jesus' ministry remain true today. Jesus, Paul and the apostles follow choose the path where love and not fear leads the way. For me, I believe the correctives to Nehemiah and Ezra came from God and demand that we choose the side of inclusion; by following Jesus [David's mudblood lineage], it seems that we have already declared our intention to do so. It seems to me that reminiscing leads to complacency and anger leads to xenophobic attitudes and nationalism, but we are called to journey home to create a new society where God is worshipped and all God's children are welcome. That's the song I'm waiting for these days.

Prayer: Most merciful God, help us not to get caught up in past visions of perfection, which never were or battles of division which never yielded true peace. Give us eyes of discernment that we might follow your leading to the love we find in our neighbors, enemies and friends. Empower us to live into your grace as we all seek to be a part of your movement of justice in the world. We pray all these things and so much more in the name of the Babe of Bethlehem. Amen.

*Rev. Mark Mendes serves as Senior Pastor of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ in Essex Junction Vermont.*

## **Day 5 (Monday, October 19) Ephesians 3:17-19 by Rev. Susie Webster-Toleno**

**Scripture focus:** *... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.* (NRSV)

**Reflection:** I am not one who has ever done well with traditional New Year's Resolutions. I certainly mean to be diligent in picking up good habits and losing unhealthy ones, but the turning of the page on the calendar doesn't seem to magically translate into personal transformation. Because of this, for the past several years I have tried on a different practice, assigning myself a theme word or phrase on New Year's Day. The hope has been that this word or phrase would shape my year, being the lens through which I look at the world and my life. I have chosen worthy enough words over the years – words like “breathe,” “spaciousness,” and “hope” – but though they have stuck with me longer than classic resolutions, they still haven't quite found a home in my life or my heart.

I became so fed up with my irresolute pattern that, in 2019, I didn't even bother assigning myself a word. I figured, maybe I'm just not the kind of person who can do that sort of thing “successfully,” whatever that might mean. I simply opted out, and in truth I felt a fair amount of relief in doing so.

But then, midway through the year, I found myself preparing for what I knew was going to be a difficult conversation with two people I care about who were in the midst of very painful conflict. They disagreed on more issues than they agreed on, frankly, but for practical reasons they needed to be able to work on some tough stuff together. My role in the conversation was to be something of a spiritual companion and referee, and to help them keep themselves from descending into mutual derision and strife. The tricky thing was that, though the conflict was not mine, I was not exactly a neutral party; I happened to share the beliefs of one of the people, and found the other's positions to be really tough to swallow. So I needed to be able to be clear and steady for both of them, and not veer into taking sides, which would be all too easy to do.

My mind was churning as I picked out what to wear to the encounter. I wanted to be confident and to radiate peace, and oddly, dressing the part seemed to matter. So I asked the question I always ask when choosing clothing for important events: “How do I want to feel on this occasion?” And the answer came immediately: “rooted and grounded in love.”

And there it was: my word not just for 2019 but hopefully for the rest of my life. It's a powerful word, and one I've returned to again and again as I make my way through our fractured world. The divides in our nation are so deep and undeniable, and sometimes cynicism and even despair take up far too much space in my heart. But when I feel myself truly rooted and grounded in Love – the foundational Love of Christ that is unendingly broad and long and high and deep – I become less entrenched in my own sense of my “rightness” and more able to be transformed and help others be transformed by Love and for love.

Prayer: Love, as a light illumine and guide me. Love, as a shield o'ershadow and cover me. Love be under me; Love be over me; Love be beside me on left hand and right. Love be before me, behind me, about me. Love this day be within me and without me. (I recite this excerpt from the well-known Celtic prayer “St. Patrick’s Breastplate” daily, often replacing the name “Christ” with “Love” in recognition of the fact that that in Christ, God’s nature and name as Love is made known.)

*Rev. Susie Webster-Toleno has been the pastor of the Congregational Church (UCC) of Westminster West since 2002, and is also a hospice spiritual counselor with Bayada Hospice.*



## **Day 6 (Tuesday, October 20) “For the Common Good” by Rev. Cordelia Burpee**

**Scripture Focus:** “.. even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others.”  
I Thessalonians 2:4b (within the larger scripture focus of I Thessalonians 2:1-6)

**Reflection:** I have this thing about First Thessalonians. In seminary I discovered that it is the oldest book in the New Testament, written a few decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection. It is clear that Paul holds a deep affection for the community in Thessalonica and is seeking to ease their distress and uncertainty. There is a personal presence and immediacy to his words as Paul is discovering how to do this new thing as the leader of a diverse and dispersed emerging church. He may not quite have the hang of it, but he is determined to guide support and reassure this community in any way he can. To me it feels real and honest.

We can identify with the community’s confusion as they sought to understand and support one another. They had many questions concerning their lives in that changing moment – who is included in God’s kingdom? What happens to those who came before us? How shall we live? What should we do now?

Pastors and church leaders can relate to Paul’s determination to get it right, to guide and support from a distance by the power of his words alone.

In this passage he reminds this community of who they know him to be. He invites them to judge his words by his actions and by his determination to avoid flattery, falsehoods and self-aggrandizement in following the path laid down for him.

Perhaps this is a useful reminder for us all, in this moment, to pick our words and consider the words of others by whether they would prove worthy of God’s notice. Does it need to be said? Is it helpful and kind? Do you think God would want you to say it? So .. maybe not that facebook post or tweet.. okay?

**Prayer:** Holy One, our teacher and guide, help us to seek to please you and you alone in all our thoughts, words and actions. It’s a tall order, we know (especially now) but with your guidance we just might get the hang of it. Thanks God – now and always. Amen.

*Rev. Cordelia Burpee serves as pastor of the Congregational Church of South Hero UCC, in South Hero, VT.*

## **Day 7 (Wednesday, October 21) “An Inward look” by Pastor Doug Cameron**

**Scripture focus:** *There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family. (Proverbs 6:16-19 NRSV)*

**Reflection:** In the current political season, it seems as if we increasingly see displays of these “things that the Lord hates”. Reading this scripture should cause us to pause and take a look inward. Are we displaying (or feeling) any of these hateful signs toward our brothers and sisters on the other side of the aisle?

Do we have “haughty eyes”, looking down on others as if we are better? Do our tongues lie, or do we have honest conversations with those with whom we disagree? While we don’t literally “shed innocent blood”, we should never have an agenda that could put others in harm’s way. Do we have hearts of love, or does our passion for “our side” lead us to think about putting others at risk? Do we hurry to cause mischief just to make a point? Do we act with honesty or do we knowingly falsely testify (fake news)? Do we remember that those on the “other” side are also part of our family?

We are living in a world that is moving at warp speed in a time of incredible stress and hardship. It can be difficult to find time to look inward to see if we are in fact part of the reason that political dialogue is so harsh and hateful. What are we doing to lessen the stress and help bring peace to God’s world, especially in this contentious time?

**Prayer:** O God, help us to be people who take an honest look inward and say, “I am your servant who always - no matter the circumstances - will work to bring all your people together to truly be a family.”

*Doug Cameron serves as Pastor of the United Federated Church in Williamstown, Vermont.*

## **Day 8 (Thursday, October 22)**

**by Rev. Dr. Barbara Purinton**

### **Scripture focus**

*“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” ( Hebrews 10:24-25 )*

### **Reflection**

“I can’t do one more zoom meeting,” I think. But as Tuesdays roll around and our weekly clergy COVID group approaches, I realize I NEED people. I need to hear what people are thinking about as leaders amidst the challenging questions about opening church and addressing racism and national unrest and the multitude of things that are on our minds.

We yearn for support and the encouragement that happens when we pray with each other and share resource links in the chat and consider how to be balanced leaders in what feels like a very unbalanced time.

“Meeting together” has taken on a whole new meaning in this time of pandemic. From the challenges of figuring out how to do the best worship and pastoral care for our congregations to acknowledging that we really want to see each other “in three dimensions” as I have said to my congregations. But its more than that - how do we bring light, God’s good energy, into the conversations of today? We need to pray.

*“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.”* Let us be concerned about one another in order to “promote love and good works”. Let us consider one another - has there ever been a time when we need to energize one another for the work of God more than now?

It is all too easy to provoke each other to anger and strife through unkindness and criticism - but as faithful people we are called to provoke one another to love. We answer darkness with light, anger with respectful disagreement, fear and division with hope of the possibility of understanding and healing.

We need to meet together, as we can, to pray together, encourage each other and share our common faith in God who continues to work in and through God’s people.

### **Prayer**

Holy One, provoke us to greater love, that we might encourage one another in the work to which you have called us, to answer each dose of darkness with an equal if not greater dose of light.

Rev. Dr. Barbara Purinton has served churches in Vermont since 1978.