

**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

**DAY 8 (October 22,2020)**

**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.*

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Day 9 (Friday, October 23)

“Bind Up the Nation’s Wounds”

The Rev. Dr. Scott Couper

**Scripture focus:** “*He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.*”  
(Psalm 147:3 NIV)

Reflection: Though not necessarily a confessing or practicing Christian, Abraham Lincoln’s writings are saturated with biblical imagery. Because he was poor and received little formal education, Lincoln was dependent on the Bible as a pedagogical primer text. As a child Lincoln essentially memorized the Bible and he used what he remembered to great effect because his audiences, both north and south, were largely Christian.

In his 1865 second inaugural address toward the conclusion of the Civil War, Lincoln, while still definitively on a political side held out an olive branch. In his address, Lincoln preached reconciliation and unity to the nation with the immortal phrase ‘with malice toward none’. At the end of the address Lincoln pleaded, “...let us strive to finish the work we are in, *to bind up the nation’s wounds*, to care for him who shall have borne the battle for his widow and his orphan, to do that which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations”.

“...*to bind up the nations wounds*” is extracted and morphed from Psalm 147:3 which reads, “[God] heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds”. The rest of Lincoln’s quoted sentence is inspired by James 1:27 that reads, “Religion that God our [Parent] accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after the

orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world”.

In offering an olive branch and encouraging reconciliation and unity, Lincoln expressed the paradox of certainty and doubt, self-assured conviction and humility. The address demonstrated that one can, and often must, choose sides, but one must not dehumanize the other.

As people of faith, we are to be living, breathing, walking oxymorons. We must proclaim the gospel with boldness to our enemies while in the same breath say to them “I love you, let us be together in peace despite our differences”.

After Lincoln’s death, secretaries found some written musings by Lincoln. One, undated and untitled read, “The will of God prevails- in great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be wrong. God cannot be *for*, and *against* the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God’s purpose is somewhat different from the purpose of either party – and yet the human instrumentalities, working as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect this”.

Prayer: Gracious God, fill us with conviction, yet may our conviction be humble. May we not lash out, but rather criticize the bad by practicing the better”. Amen.

*Rev Dr. Scott Couper serves as minister of the Centre Congregational Church in Brattleboro, VT.*

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Day 10 (Saturday, October 24)

Make Love, Not Truth

Matt Deen

**Scripture focus:** *“be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord”*  
(*Philippians 2:2 NRSV*)

Reflection: There’s no getting around it. As our country nears what is already a deeply contentious national election, we have great cause for concern. Bitter and frequently violent disagreements are now an everyday reality, and civil unrest seems sure to follow whatever outcome results from November 3. These tensions ensnare even our churches as congregants find themselves positioned on opposing sides of the present political and cultural divide.

Of course, there’s nothing at all wrong with having different perspectives; indeed, our own denomination thrives on such diversity! The problem arises when we lose the ability to disagree in good faith. In our own time, impugning the motives of those with whom we disagree is a common and alluring temptation. Have you ever found yourself thinking something like this?: “There’s no way that person honestly believes what they are saying. They’re just ignorant or naive or heartless!”

When confronted with forcefully opposing views, it can be hard to resist such cynicism. This impulse can have the effect of hardening our faith into truth-claims, ideas by which we measure the sincerity or validity of other folks’ convictions. You could call this a litmus test for discerning who is and is not a *true* Christian How

might we overcome such antipathy? I think Paul's letter to the young church he planted in Philippi can help us.

That budding congregation was made up largely of converts from a broad range of philosophies, which were part of fully formed, embodied traditions (not just "schools of thought"). Given this, it is not difficult to imagine what may have prompted Paul's concern for unity in the church. He recognized that the root of the problem was the absence of trust between various members of the church. Adherence to certain truth-claims or spiritual understandings thus came to rival genuine care and concern as the definitive marker of one's faith. The task before Paul, then, was to help members of the church probe the mystery of Christ's love, which could inspire them to deepen their connection and resilience as a community.

To many, what Paul instructs here is quite radical—he goes so far as to suggest that the faithful should treat each other better than they would themselves! This may seem to us hopelessly aspirational and even unhealthy. And perhaps it is. Or perhaps Paul has a very clear sense of how to cut through the mutually assured distrust-ction of tensive claims to ultimate truth. For Paul, the way forward through bitter discord is to re/member our place in the relational web to which we belong. In the end, this is what it means to "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord." And no idea, whatever truth it may contain, can compete with this.

Prayer: Creative Love of the Universe, give us the strength to endure in the face of these helplessly polarizing times, the vision to recognize the fullness of our community, and the conviction to draw on the courage of our connections. Amen.

*Matt Deen is Associate Director for Institutional Partnerships at Auburn Theological Seminary and a recent graduate of Union Theological Seminary. He worships at Centre Congregational Church in Brattleboro.*

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**Scripture Focus:** Philippians 4: 4-7 NRSV

by Ted Marcy

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (New Revised Standard Version--NRSV)*

**Reflection**

When Paul wrote this letter to the community at Philippi, he was imprisoned, possibly in Ephesus, under a threatened death sentence. Before this, as Paul recounts in 2 Corinthians 11, he had 40 lashes five times, he was beaten three times with rods, stoned once, and shipwrecked at least three times. His pastoral leadership and financial management had been severely questioned by a church that he had founded (at Corinth). And yet, despite all of these experiences of physical and mental anguish, he could write this remarkable message of the surpassing strength of God's peaceful presence.

We are within a global pandemic, experiencing economic distress, facing a fraught election, and with fears of a constitutional crisis. We may feel afflicted, persecuted, perplexed and knocked down. But we are not abandoned by the God who in human form forgave his executioners on the cross, and who overcame death.

In this letter, Paul also tells us to be like Christ; to love our enemies, and to pray for them. We are not to hold others in contempt. Contempt never wins an argument, usually the opposite, and is bad both for the target of our contempt and us. We should see those on the other side of the political spectrum as children of God like ourselves. We are to listen respectfully and to attempt to



understand their point of view before offering our own. This is not easy, but we have a contemporary model – the friendship of Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Antonin Scalia.

### **Prayer**

Creating, Redeeming and Sustaining God, we are mindful of the real sources of stress in our lives and the lives of those near and far, known and unknown. May your inspired word, written by real people in times and places even more challenging than ours guide us. Help us to follow Paul and to pray with thanksgiving confident in God's surpassing peace. And help us to follow the model of Jesus in loving those with whom we disagree. AMEN

*Ted Marcy is a retired pulmonologist as well as a clergy spouse. He and his wife, Rev. Kim Hornung-Marcy, have become active participants at Williston Federated Church in Williston, VT since Kim retired as pastor of North Ferrisburgh United Methodist Church earlier this year.*

**Day 12 (Monday, October 26)**

**by Rev. Ken White**

**Scripture Focus:** *After John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:14-15, CEB)*

**Reflection:** In times that are often defined by division, it's great to have some things that we can almost all agree on: ice cream is yummy, puppies are cute, and 2020 stinks. We're trying to love you 2020, we really are, but you're making it terribly difficult.

But as bad as 2020 is, 20 was no piece of cake either. In 20, when Jesus was a young man, perhaps he was travelling with his father Joseph to Sepphora, making beautiful houses that people like him would never get to live in; houses for people who were able to afford those houses precisely because they dominated the social and economic lives of Jesus and his neighbors by force – all under the guise of that malleable watchword, "peace" (*pax Romana*, to be exact).

And a few years later, Mark tells us that Jesus goes out into the desert to be baptized by this locust-eating hippie named John who has this radical idea that justice will happen outside the temple and outside the courthouses, if people will simply choose to act justly. And it's here, of course, that Jesus experiences God telling him that he is God's son. Jesus takes a while to process this, but what snaps him into action is a political situation: John, the one who baptized him, is arrested.

And Jesus' response? He starts sharing good news. Change can happen, he says, because God's dream is *right here*. Can you see it? Can you taste it on the air? It's coming, and it doesn't depend on Caesar, and it doesn't depend on a tetrarch or a governor. It doesn't even depend on fair taxation or representation or someone else telling you that you can do something. It's bigger than all of that! You have the power to change you, and that is enough. That's good news! That's *great news*!

I am deeply grateful to live in a democracy – in *this* democracy - with all the responsibility and hope that brings. It gives me a way to work toward policies that I feel move us as a people closer to God's dream. Sometimes I think I'm right about some things; I know I've been wrong about a lot. Fortunately, God's dream is a lot bigger than my opinions or our policies or even this country that I love so deeply. May I have the courage to trust my life to the Good News of Jesus Christ, and for that trust to move me to act with dignity and freedom, without despair or hate. May that trust lead me to Love.

**Prayer:** O God, help us make wise choices. Thank you for the gift of this country. Help us change our ways to be more aligned to the arc of time and space that bends toward justice. Help us love our neighbors. And God, help us remember that your love is bigger than our national

borders and that your ways are truer than any man-made system. We rest in the blessing of your Good News; help us share that with others. Amen.

*Rev. Ken White is pastor of College Street Congregational UCC in Burlington, VT.*

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“How can I find you?”

Scripture focus: Is there anyplace I can go to avoid your Spirit? To be out of your sight? If I climb to the sky, you're there! If I go underground, you're there! If I flew on morning's wings to the far western horizon, you'd find me in a minute - you're already there waiting! Then I said to myself, “Oh, he even sees me in the dark! At night I'm immersed in the light!” It's a fact: darkness isn't dark to you; night and day, darkness and light, they're all the same to you. Psalm 139

Reflection: It is so easy to feel abandoned by God. I look around our world and see despair, fear, rancor, destruction, and hatred. Specifically, I see illness, suffering, death, fire, hurricanes, lying and cheating. I won't go on. You get the idea. We live in perilous times.

Where are you, God? If indeed you are everywhere, how can I find you?

When each of us does what we can for the common good, we find many ways, large and small, to engage and be positive. We're all doing it: spending time with family and friends; giving money to causes we value; checking in with neighbors; volunteering in myriad ways; talking and listening to each other; smiling beneath our masks; reading and learning and teaching; protesting and resisting; caring for children and elders. (Insert your action here!) Often, just staying quiet and out of the fray is exactly the right and best thing to do at that moment. I find that in doing good, in a humble, “I think God is with me” sort of way, I am saving myself from despair, serving others, finding God, and spreading God's love.

Prayer: God of everywhere, welcome to my small corner. Please stick around, outside of me and inside of me, above me and below, by day and by night. I understand that I share you with everyone else. Yet, when my heart and mind are open, you are my closest companion. Amen.

Cary Friberg is a member of the Barre Congregational Church.

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Day 14 (Wednesday, October 28) “And No One Shall Make Them Afraid”

Rev. Kim McKerley

**Scripture Focus** ... *but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; Micah 4:4, NRSV*

### Reflection

I should probably be embarrassed to admit this, since it seems to be fairly widely known, but until I saw the musical *Hamilton*, I did not know that George Washington was fond of this verse from the book of the prophet Micah. It was his go-to Scripture!

Thanks to Disney+, I saw *Hamilton* (on my laptop!) in July. I couldn't wait to see and hear for myself if all the accolades were true. Spoiler alert: they were! I laughed. I cried. I learned a lot!

I was surprised to hear words from Micah in one of the songs. In “One Last Time”, Washington sings his farewell to the nation as he steps down from the presidency. The song quotes verse 4, then Washington adds his desire to enjoy time under his own vine and fig tree. But it is more than a vision of retirement relaxation at Washington's beloved Mount Vernon. It is a fervent hope that the nation that he and others shaped, the nation that he and others dearly loved, would know prosperity and peace.

After watching *Hamilton* I discovered that Washington often invoked the image of vines and fig trees. There are nearly 50 examples in his correspondence. That vision of security and stability sustained him and he used it as an encouragement to others.

The prophet Micah held up God's promise of safety and peace to a people with little experience of it. It is, of course, a peace that would come only after swords were fashioned into ploughshares (verse 3). In the early days of our nation, George Washington was inspired by that promise. As we cast our ballots, may we, too, cling to the promise. May we pray for the day when violence and oppression are a distant memory, a day when all will live in safety, a day when no one shall be afraid.

### Prayer

Holy One, we long to rest in your promise and live in your peace. Give us courage to help create a society in which no one shall be afraid. Amen.

*Rev. Kim McKerley serves as pastor of Bethany Church United Church of Christ in Randolph.*