

Contemplative Prayer Service for Grace-filled Civic Engagement

Hi, I am Pastor Steve Winsor of Nativity Lutheran church in Palm Beach Gardens, FL. This Contemplative Prayer Service for Grace-filled Civic Engagement was prepared by the Just Love team of the Florida Bahamas Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for their 2024 Fall Conference on Ministry in September of 2024. It has been modified with permission for this podcast. You will hear 14 voices in this prayer service. Our ages are 10 to 96 years young! We are U.S. citizens, and legal guests of this country. We are a people of different, political views, cultures and ethnicities. We are a part of the many voices that make up the body of Christ, just as many voices make for the great country we live in.

You are invited, to find a space wherein you can join the voices you are about to hear. This may be by yourself on your patio, or deck. It may be in your car as you commute to work. It may be in the quiet of the beginning or end of a day. Or perhaps that space is physically with others. Gathered together, you reflect openly, offering one another a space for reflection on what grace-filled civic engagement looks like to one another. With those on this podcast, or in the company of others, listen with each other. Faithfully ponder the life in Christ we are called into together. Be challenged together, but be hopeful together. One more thing to note, there is a healthy dose of silent space embedded within this prayer service. Use that time and space to listen to what the creator of time and space may be saying to you. Now let us take a moment to clear our hearts and minds so that our Lord God may fill them with what is good.

Opening Prayer & Kyrie

_____The prophet Isaiah invited God's people to "Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows." And yet too often we are silent when we should speak and we speak when we should be silent.

_____For speaking out for the sake of showing off, **Lord, have mercy**

_____For speaking out for the sake of control, **Christ, have mercy**

_____For speaking out for the sake of judgement, **Lord, have mercy**

_____ For not speaking up out of politeness, **Lord, have mercy**

_____ For not speaking up out of fear, **Christ, have mercy**

_____ For not speaking up out of indifference, **Lord, have mercy**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

_____ In the bible, the Hebrew word shalom, “depicts God's goal for creation and points *to the nature of God’s ongoing active engagement with it*. God’s power and love seeks shalom, the fullness of peace, well-being, goodness, truth, beauty, justice, freedom, wholesomeness, and love woven together for all.”¹ As people made in God’s image, we are invited to follow Paul’s advice to the Romans in chapter 12, verse 18 where he writes, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” and be representatives of this shalom. In this time of contemplative listening and prayer, you are invited to return to the life giving waters of baptism, to put to death the ways you may have forgotten, or turned from the invitation to shalom, and to emerge from the waters, evangelists, messengers of shalom, salt of the earth, light to the world.

_____ As we live, and are called by our faith to live and lead in a contentious election season, let us reflect on our nation’s history. In 1776, our forebears declared independence from England, claiming dignity, equality and the right to self-governance. In 1787, our forebears signed the constitution enshrining a government of the people, by the people and for the people and putting in place a set of checks and balances to prevent tyranny.

_____ A Reading from Romans 13, verses 1 to 7:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad conduct. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval, ⁴ for it is God’s agent for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the agent of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. ⁶ For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s agents, busy with this

very thing.⁷ Pay to all what is due them: taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

_____ This letter to the Romans reminds us that government remains God's gift because it is intended to do what churches, families, individuals, and businesses cannot do on their own: protect and coordinate the well-being of individuals, communities, and creation.²

Yet these words from the letter to the Romans have also been used to encourage quietism in the face of unjust governance. This was true in Nazi Germany and it continues to be true today. Our church teaches that "civil government at all levels can be a force for good or for evil— or, most accurately, *both* in some combination."² Robust, faithful civic participation includes participating and supporting just governance, and the prophetic task of raising our voices and votes against unjust governance.

_____ Martin Luther sometimes defines the roles of the two kingdoms in the following way: "It is the work and glory of the ministry of the right hand of the kingdom to make real saints out of sinners, living souls out of the dead, saved souls out of the damned, children of God out of servants of the devil. Just as it is the work and the glory of the temporal government, the left hand of the kingdom, to make human beings out of wild beasts and to keep human beings from turning into wild beasts."³ Luther states that both have their place and proper influence upon our lives.

_____ However, while Luther sometimes uses the phrase "Two Kingdoms" to refer to church and state, in truth it has a much wider scope. The two dimensions of God's domain or reign in the world concern the ministry of the Gospel through faith, and the ministry of loving justice toward our neighbor through action. Luther writes, "This is our theology, by which we teach a precise distinction between these two kinds of righteousness, the active and the passive, so that morality and faith, works and grace, secular society and religion may not be confused. Both are necessary, but both must be kept within their limits. . . We set forth two worlds, as it were, one of them heavenly and the other earthly" (Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* 1535, LW 26:7-8)⁴.

_____ The two hands or dimensions of God's kingdom, in other words, aren't merely church and state, but the entire scope of heavenly grace and earthly justice,

of being before God by faith and before our neighbor in Just Love. On this basis, Luther teaches that the church must always be non-violent and never take up arms (LW 8:264; LW 20:288), that governments should err on the side of too little force, rather than too much because of the risk of abusing the innocent (LW 45:105), that governments should be secular (LW 13:194-5), that love and the natural law written on our hearts should take precedence over the laws on the books (LW 13:369; LW 45:127-8; see also *Table Talk*, LW 54:325), that we should accept injustice toward ourselves in taking up our cross but that we should tolerate no injustice toward our neighbor (LW 45:101), and that following the example of Joseph in Genesis, governments are to provide for the hungry poor (*Lectures on Genesis*, LW 7:158, see also *Large Catechism*, LW 13:42-72).

_____ How, then, can we as Christians remain silent if government abuses the people or goes astray from justice? We cannot. Luther states we are to honor both left and right, but also are to hold them accountable to justice. Luther writes, “We should accord each one it’s honor and due their honor, both being ordinances and works of God, and we should not consider it if, in both kingdoms those whom office has been committed are not pious and misuse their office...and berate and persecute us as disobedient and seditious folk. This we should and must bear, though we reserve the right of rebuking them by word of mouth and telling the truth and letting the imputed guilt lie on us.” ⁴ When the conscience is spoken to, and awakened by the Gospel, as persons of faith we are to speak, to call leaders, government and church, into just love and beloved community.

Silence/reflection

_____ This is the Gospel according to Matthew, the 20th chapter, verses 20-28:

20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. **21** And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” **22** But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?”^[a] They said to him, “We are able.” **23** He said to them, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.” **24** When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. **25** But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over

them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ²⁶ It will not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸ just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”

_____ In this country, like James and John, and the ancient Israelites before them, we sometimes get confused about God’s vision for the world and our own vision for national success. We confuse military might and success with God’s desire and blessing. We confuse God’s invitation to servant leadership with corporate and military models of leadership. We confuse the promise of prestige and glory with Jesus’ witness to risk, service, and sacrifice. This confusion permeates our country, our history, and humanity.

Silence/Reflection

_____ *Our forebears wrote, “We hold these truths to be self-evident.”*

_____ Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” He says, “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

Silence/Reflection

_____ *Our forebears wrote that “all men are created equal.”*

_____ Our scriptures say that “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” They say that “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Silence/Reflection

_____ *Our forebears wrote that men “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.”*

_____ Our scriptures add, “But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.”

Silence/Reflection

_____ *Our forebears wrote that we have an unalienable right to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”*

_____ But, just after he says, “I came that they may have life and have abundantly,” Jesus says, “and I lay down my life for the sheep.” He teaches, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Silence/Reflection

_____ *Our forebears wrote that “Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”*

_____ Our scriptures say that “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us,” that “while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son,” and, for that reason, that we are now “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

Silence/Reflection

_____ A reading from Paul to the Galatians, chapter 5, verse 13:

For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don’t use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love.

Silence/Reflection

_____ Let us pray.

God of love, of justice, and of truth, in these times when love of country is being twisted toward a love of power for its own sake, remind us of your self-sacrificing love for all of creation; remind us that, although we were not founded as a Christian nation, each of us enjoys the freedom to love our neighbor as ourselves and to love our enemies with Christ-like love. Help us to reject the violent and untruthful rhetoric of Christian nationalism, and guide us by your values of humble service and respect for all persons; we ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son and our Redeemer. **Amen.**

Silence/Reflection

_____ Drawn together in the power of the Holy Spirit, we pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

Lord God, you call your people to honor those in authority. Help us elect trustworthy leaders, participate in wise decisions for our common life, and serve our neighbors as we serve ourselves. Merciful God...Receive our Prayer.

_____ God of Justice, we lift before you all who govern. May those who hold power understand that it is a trust from you to be used, not for personal glory or profit, but for the service of the people. Drive from us cynicism, selfishness, and corruption; grant in your mercy just and honest government; and give us grace to live together in unity and peace.

Merciful God...Receive our Prayer

_____ God of all Righteousness, you have declared what is right: to seek justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with you. Bless judges and courts, juries and law officers throughout our land. Guard them from retribution and from corruption. Give them the spirit of wisdom, that they may perceive the truth and administer the law impartially as instruments of your divine will.

Merciful God...Receive our Prayer.

_____ God of reconciliation, you sent your son to reconcile us to you and one another. Rekindle among us the gift of your Spirit that we might live as one new humanity in Christ, dismantling the walls that divide, ending the hostility between us, and proclaiming peace to those who are near and far away.

Merciful God... Receive our Prayer

_____ God of healing, we pray for all those who suffer in mind, body or spirit from the fear, anxiety and violence of this world. Surround us all with your peace that surpasses all understanding and free us to love our neighbors and work together in your love for the common good.

Merciful God... Receive our Prayer.

_____ God of Peace, send your Spirit where hate and violence festers, and seeks release. May life- giving rhetoric prevail in this election season. Move us to be pockets of healing, life-giving speech. For darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. And hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

Merciful God...Receive our Prayer.

_____ We pray all this and those prayers still bubbling in the recesses of our heart with the prayer Jesus taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forevermore. **Amen.**

May you each go on the way as representatives of peace and sacrificial love. Indeed you are the light of the world and the salt of the earth. Go in peace. You are the body of Christ in and for the sake of the world. **Thanks be to God.**

All biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version translation.

Works cited include the, draft statement, *Faith in Civic Life*, of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,

Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy, A Social Message published June 24th of 2024 by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

What Luther Says, Volume 1 and *Luther's Works, the American Edition*.

A transcript of this *podcast*, with detailed citations can be found at pbnativity.com under the service and outreach dropdown menu.

¹ Draft Statement, Faith in Civic Life

² *Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy*, Social Message

³ *What Luther Says, Volume 1*, p.292, 858; Concordia Publishing House, 1959.

⁴ *What Luther Says, Volume 1*, p.292-292, 858-59; Concordia Publishing House, 1959.

⁵ *Luther's Works, the American Edition*, see citations for exact volume; *Concordia Publishing House* and *Fortress Press*, 1955-1986.