

“Let there be one prayer”

### **Week 2: Ignatius of Antioch**

This week our series on the *Apostolic Fathers* continues with Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (c. 35 - c. 110), the place where the disciples were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26). Ignatius was most likely martyred in the Coliseum at Rome during the reign of emperor Trajan (98-117), and is commemorated on the ELCA church calendar on October 17th. Like Paul (Acts 25:11-12), Ignatius was taken to Rome for judgment, and en route to Rome wrote seven letters, to the Ephesians, Magnesians, Trallians, Romans, Philadelphians, Smyrneans, and to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. Our knowledge of Ignatius comes primarily from these letters as well as from Polycarp, whom we will look at next week. Ignatius’ letters offer insight into three aspects of the Christian faith that continue to be relevant today: unity with Christ and one another; the role of the bishop in the church and suffering as a mark of discipleship to Christ.

Regarding unity, Ignatius insisted that Christian unity is rooted in the spiritual unity of Jesus with the Father. As the risen Jesus gave his peace and unity to the church, Christians were to witness to this unity in word and deed. Ignatius addressed this while battling Docetism, a heresy that taught that Jesus only “seemed” to have a physical body and therefore his suffering was an illusion. What was at stake was a theology of Incarnation in which Jesus, the Word made flesh, suffered, died and was raised. Ignatius insisted on the reality of Christ’s humanity and divinity, meaning that his birth, life and passion were rooted in the reality of human history. Christians celebrated the Eucharist as a sign of unity with one another and with the risen Christ.

In addition, these letters offer understanding into the role of the bishop. At a time when the apostles were no longer living, and the church was developing, Ignatius understood the bishop to be the representative of Christ, guiding the church in all matters. The New Testament used different terms for leaders while not always clearly differentiating between them. For example, 1 Corinthians 12:27ff mentions apostles, prophets and teachers, but not bishops. The word for bishops (*episcopos* in Greek) emerges in pastoral letters such as 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. While in 1 Peter 5 the terms “elders” or “presbyters” are used, and in Acts 20:17 “presbyters” is used, suggesting that these terms were still somewhat interchangeable. However, Ignatius’ letters offer a more clearly defined view of the bishop as the church was beginning to grow out of the apostolic age.

Finally, Ignatius offers insight into discipleship and suffering in the Christian life. Ignatius viewed suffering as the path to discipleship writing, “Now at last I am beginning to be a disciple” (Compare this with Philippians 3:10 “*that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead*”; and also with Matthew 5:10-12, “*Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you*”).

Ignatius lived during the time of emperor Trajan, which also made him a contemporary of Pliny the Younger, who was governor of the Roman province Bithynia and Pontus in northern Asia Minor from c. 110 to 112. The letters exchanged between Pliny and Trajan contain the earliest surviving Roman discussion about the interrogation of Christians. Though Trajan stressed that Christians were to be treated according to the law and not “hunted out,” if they did become known, Trajan confirmed that Pliny was correct in offering them the opportunity to

recant their faith. If they would not recant, worship the Roman gods and offer incense to Caesar, they were to be executed. Ignatius' letters were therefore written against this background suggesting that Ignatius had refused to recant and was therefore being sent to Rome for execution.

**Excerpts from the letters of Ignatius of Antioch:**

*To the Ephesians:* [10] Pray continually for the rest of humankind as well, that they may find God, for there is in them hope for repentance. Therefore allow them to be instructed by you, at least by your deeds. In response to their anger, be gentle; in response to their boasts, be humble; in response to their slander, offer prayers; in response to their errors, be "steadfast in the faith"; in response to their cruelty, be gentle; do not be eager to retaliate against them. Let us show ourselves their brothers by our forbearance, and let us be eager to be imitators of the Lord...[17] The Lord accepted the ointment upon his head for this reason: that he might breathe incorruptibility upon the church. Do not be anointed with the stench of the teaching of the ruler of this age, lest he take you captive and rob you of the life set before you. Why do we not all become wise by receiving God's knowledge, which is Christ Jesus? Why do we foolishly perish, ignoring the gracious gift which the Lord has truly sent? [18] My spirit is a humble sacrifice for the cross, which is a stumbling block to unbelievers, but salvation and eternal life to us...[20] Continue to gather together, each and every one of you, collectively and individually by name, in grace, in one faith and one Jesus Christ, who physically was a descendant of David, who is Son of man and Son of God, in order that you may obey the bishop and the presbytery with an undisturbed mind, breaking one bread, which is the medicine of immortality, the antidote we take in order not to die, but to live forever in Jesus Christ.

*To the Magnesians:* [5] Seeing then that all things have an end, two things together lie before us, death and life, and everyone will go to his own place. For just as there are two coinages, the one of God and the other of the world, and each of them has its own stamp impressed upon it, so the unbelievers bear the stamp of this world, but the faithful in love bear the stamp of God the Father through Jesus Christ, whose life is not in us unless we voluntarily choose to die into his suffering. [6] ...Let there be nothing among you which is capable of dividing you, but be united with the bishop and with those who lead, as an example and a lesson of incorruptibility. [7] Therefore, as the Lord did nothing without the Father, either by himself or through the apostles (for he was united with them), so you must not do anything without the bishop and the presbyters. Do not attempt to convince yourselves that anything done apart from the others is right, but, gathering together, let there be one prayer, one petition, one mind, one hope, with love and blameless joy, which is Jesus Christ, than whom nothing is better...

*To the Romans:* [4] I am writing to all the churches and insisting to everyone that I die for God of my own free will... Let me be food for the wild beasts, through whom I can reach God. I am God's wheat, and I am being ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that they may become my tomb and leave nothing of my body behind, lest I become a burden to someone once I have fallen asleep. Then will I truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world will no longer see my body...But if I suffer, I will be a freedman of Jesus Christ, and will rise up free in him. In the meantime, as a prisoner I am learning to desire nothing. [5] ...Now at last I am beginning to be a disciple. May nothing visible or invisible envy me, so that I may reach Jesus Christ. Fire and cross and battles with wild beasts, mutilation, mangling, wrenching of bones, the hacking of limbs, the crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil – let these come upon me, only let me reach Christ!

*To the Smyrneans:* [8] Flee from divisions, as the beginning of evils. You must all follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and follow the presbytery as you would the apostles, respect the deacons as the commandment of God. Let no one do anything that has to do with the church without the bishop. Only that Eucharist which is under the authority of the bishop [or whomever he himself designates] is to be considered valid. Wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be, just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church.

*To Polycarp:* [2] ...You are both physical and spiritual in nature for this reason, that you might treat gently whatever appears before you, but ask, in order that the unseen things may be revealed to you, that you may be lacking in nothing and abound in every spiritual gift. The time needs you (as pilots need winds and as a storm-tossed sailor needs a harbor) in order to reach God. Be sober as God's athlete; the prize is incorruptibility and eternal life, about which you are already convinced...[3] Do not let those who appear to be trustworthy yet who teach strange doctrines baffle you. Stand firm, like an anvil being struck with a hammer. It is the mark of a great athlete to be bruised, yet still conquer. But especially we must, for God's sake, patiently put up with all things, that he may also put up with us. Be more diligent than you are. Understand the times. Wait expectantly for him who is above time, the Eternal, the Invisible, who for our sake became visible; the Intangible, the Unsuffering, who for our sake suffered, who for our sake endured in every way. [6] ...Train together with one another: struggle together, run together, suffer together, rest together, get up together, as God's managers, assistants, and servants. Please him whom you serve as soldiers, from whom you receive your wages. Let none of you be found a deserter. Let your baptism serve as a shield, faith as a helmet, love as a spear, endurance as armor. Let your deeds be your deposits, in order that you may eventually receive the savings that are due to you. Be, therefore, patient and gentle with one another, as God is with you... [7] ...A Christian has no authority over himself; rather he devotes his time to God. This is God's work, and will be yours, when you complete it. For by grace I trust that you are ready for a good work in the service of God. Knowing the intensity of your sincerity, I have exhorted you only briefly. [8] ...I bid you farewell always in our God Jesus Christ; may you remain in him, in the unity and care of God...Farewell in the Lord. (from *The Apostolic Fathers*. Trans. Lightfoot & Harmer, Ed. by Michael W. Holmes, 2nd edition, 1989).

### **Meditation**

Reading Ignatius' letters is to be reminded of the urgency of time. Time is brief and is marked by the character of the times in which we live. In his *Letter to Polycarp*, Ignatius wrote, "Be more diligent than you are. Understand the times." Diligence is motivated by a sense of urgency and the knowledge that time, like the sand in an hourglass, disappears. For all of his words about suffering, Ignatius understood the times in which he lived with a sense of hope in the abiding presence of Christ Jesus. Our lifetimes are limited and how we use this time is a reflection of what is at the center of our lives.

For Ignatius, time was to be spent in prayer, and in the imitation of Christ with gentleness, humility, forbearance, and with steadfast faith. Ignatius exhorted the Ephesians, writing, "Why do we foolishly perish, ignoring the gracious gift which the Lord has truly sent?" Reminiscent of Joseph Scriven's hymn, "Oh, what peace we often forfeit; oh, what needless pain we bear – all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer" (ELW 742), Ignatius suggests that prayer leads to strength, unity with God and unity with humankind. In prayer we grasp and struggle with the gift of grace that is Christ, which prevents us from being "anointed with the stench of the teaching of the ruler of this age." Like Mary expressing her prayer by anointing

Jesus with oil, filling the house “with the fragrance of the perfume” (John 12:3b), prayer anoints our lives with the fragrance of God’s grace. Ignatius offers the hope that our diligence in prayer and our imitation of Christ will impact the times in which we live.

Ignatius was also concerned with unity in the church and saw the bishop as a very real expression of unity in Christ. By loving one another “the faithful bear the stamp of God” in unity with the bishop and with one another. Ignatius encouraged the church to be one in prayer, with one mind, hope, and joy. For Ignatius, unity is to be “in Christ to love one another.” Our contemporary Lutheran church reflects this concern for unity with the bishop as the visible sign of Christ the good shepherd in the church. Pastors are ordained by the bishop and installed by the bishop, or by someone whom the bishop designates. Ignatius’ words about the episcopal aspect of church polity are part of the great treasure the church has inherited from the apostolic age. Our contemporary individualistic culture can work against unity with one another, the bishop and with Christ. We are told by the times in which we live that freedom means we can do what we want at the expense of unity with Christ, the church, and one another. To be one in Christ reveals that unity is possible with grace, even when worldly unity is appears impossible.

Finally, to read Ignatius’ letters is to struggle with Christian discipleship. Ignatius lived in times that were extremely different than our own. Modern concepts of religious toleration and freedom of belief did not yet exist. Freedom in Christ meant freedom from sin and the powers of the world. The liberation of knowing Christ meant that even without modern religious freedom, one was freed from sin and every worldly power that could separate them from Christ. It has long been recognized that the church grows in faith when it is most oppressed by the world. Ignatius challenges us about the compromises we make in the modern world which limit freedom and unity in Christ.

Jesus’ words in The Beatitudes, “*Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you*” are difficult words because following Christ brings conflict with the world. Ignatius wrote, “cruel tortures of the devil – let these come upon me, only let me reach Christ!” Like Paul writing, “*becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead,*” Ignatius witnesses to a discipleship of dying to the self, in order that he might follow and suffer with Jesus. How different are his words about “learning to desire nothing” from our materialist culture! To walk with Jesus is the daily denial of the self and the world, in which we accept our identity as children of God rather than as children of the world.

Ignatius’ words “Let there be one prayer,” points to unity with Christ, his church and with one another. In the church we are to “struggle together” thereby knowing Christ and the Christian life. Ignatius’ words to Polycarp, “A Christian has no authority over himself; rather he devotes his time to God,” makes us ask the question, “Daily, how do I devote my time suffering with Christ for the unity of his body the church, and witnessing to God’s love for this world? Amen.

**For further reading:**

*Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*. Edited by Everett Ferguson, New York & London: Garland Publishers, second edition, 1999.

*The Apostolic Fathers*. Translated by J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer, Edited by Michael W. Holmes, Grand Rapids: Baker, (1891; second edition, 1989), third edition, 2006.

Pliny, *Letters and Panegyricus*. Volume II, Loeb Classical Library No. 59, Translated by Betty Radice, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1969.