Recall the scene…you were walking down the street in a noisy, bustling city. Perhaps Philadelphia or New York or some other major city in the world. And there he was—there she was—simply holding out a can to you. Without the needy person saying a word, you knew she or he was inviting you to give some of your change or, better yet, a dollar or two. The outstretched arm holding a container said it all. “I’m in need. Can you help?”

Or recall those TV images of relief workers in some war-torn country doling out cooked rice to famine-stricken people. Each hungry soul eagerly holding out their empty bowl to receive something to eat.

Today you are invited to hold out your can to God. Today we are invited together, as a congregation, to hold out our bowl to God. We are called to prayer by the Ministry Team and this is the posture we are called to take in this season of prayer.

For some months now, we have been laying the groundwork for carrying out a necessary discernment process regarding church membership for gays and lesbians. In January and February we engaged in worship and study focused on God’s good gift of human sexuality. Over the summer, we explored together what is sexual wholeness for all of us—young and old, single and married, straight or gay and more. During October, we focused on the meaning of church membership. In January, we begin more focused study and dialogue about homosexuality.

In these couple months before we enter more deeply into this conversation together, we need to deliberately bathe this whole process in prayer. Together, as a congregation, we must enter a time of actively praying and continue to pray throughout this process. We are the needy ones holding out our empty bowl to God, asking for God to fill it. This is the image of Frazer in prayer for this discernment process. Will you join in holding out Frazer’s bowl to God? (Hold out the bowl.) This is the posture you are invited to, in this call to prayer.

As I’ve been reading various resources in preparation for shepherding this discernment process, I read over and over again, it must be bathed in prayer. In his 2003 book titled, *Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment*, Mennonite N.T. professor Willard Swartley writes (page 130):

“For Christians, prayer together is essential. If we seek to discern the will of God on this matter, we need to bathe ourselves personally and corporately in prayer. When we pray, …we have a chance of hearing God’s word and receiving direction as to just what the gospel mission for the church is for its own life and for our culture, as word of witness.”

Disciple of Christ writer, Ruth Fletcher, says:

“Discernment has to do with sifting through the information we’ve been given in order to make sense of it. For centuries, Christians have used the word *discernment* to describe the prayerful process of seeking God’s leading in their individual lives and in the life of the church. That seeking, that longing to know God’s heart, points to the reality of our human condition: We can enter into the loving, creative mystery in which life is created,
bathed, and nurtured; we can orient ourselves toward a hope that transcends our own vision.” (quoted from *Listening to the Spirit: A Handbook for Discernment*, p. 4-5).

Turning to God and holding out our bowl for divine guidance is orienting ourselves toward that hope. It’s a humble acknowledge that we cannot carry out this process on our own. We will not find our way alone. We do not seek to arrive at a decision that is only of our own making. No, we seek to know the will of God on this matter.

And so we are all called to prayer. All of us are called to commit ourselves to prayer for this discernment process. Pray together and pray alone. In various ways, holding before God our need for divine leading.

The “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love” statement that we passed at our congregation meeting a couple of weeks ago pledges that we will pray. “Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace as both individual members and the body of Christ, we pledge that we shall: commit to prayer.” That commitment is spelled out this way: We shall “admit our needs and commit ourselves to pray for a mutually satisfactory solution (no prayers for my success for the other to change but to find a joint way).” This commitment to prayer begins with admitting our needs.

The scripture reading for today from Colossians 1 gives some insights into what we need—what we are holding out our bowl to receive. This is part of a letter from Paul and Timothy to the church at Colossae. This church was in the midst of discerning truth from heresy, and Paul and Timothy send this letter of encouragement and guidance. They begin by communicating that they are praying for the Colossians, thanking God for them and their faith. In fact they write, “we have not ceased praying for you.” Then Paul and Timothy let them know exactly what they’ve been praying for:

Four specific things…

1) Verse 9 – “asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.”;
2) Verse 10 – “that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to [God], as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.”
3) Verse 11 - that “you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God’s glorious power,
4) Verse 11 – “and [that] you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.”

This scripture is instructive about what we need from God here at Frazer as we discern our response to gays and lesbians desiring membership. It suggests what we are holding out our bowl together to receive from God. First of all, we need to receive the knowledge of God’s will. We need to know what God wants. Paul and Timothy call this spiritual wisdom and understanding, and they pray that the Colossians would be filled with it. In prayer, we need to humbly admit that we may not know what God wants. We may know clearly what we want, but do we really know what God wants? We all come to this discernment about homosexuality with our own wisdom and understanding. In this time of prayer, we hold out our bowl to receive God’s wisdom and God’s understanding on this matter. We admit our need to know what God wants Frazer to
do—how God wants us to respond to gays and lesbians desiring membership. We hold out our bowl to be filled with God’s wisdom and understanding.

Secondly, we pray that we may lead lives worthy of our Lord, Jesus Christ. We pray to know what it means to live up to our name—Christians, followers of Jesus Christ. Paul indicates that Christians “bear fruit in every good work” and we “grow in the knowledge of God.” We don’t just receive God’s wisdom and understanding once and done—this is a process of growing in our understanding and knowledge of God’s will, and growing in reflecting that knowledge in the way we live our lives. We hold up our bowl in prayer saying, “Teach us how to live and practice your ways.” We open ourselves to learn and to grow.

Third, we hold up our bowl to receive the strength that comes from God. Paul and Timothy’s words here indicate that the Colossians are weak and they need strength from God to discern truth from error. They need a power beyond themselves to stand up against heresy and for God’s truth. We are weak and needy as we engage in this discernment process about homosexuality. This conversation in other churches and in other denominations has proven to be very difficult and divisive and emotional. This theological and moral discernment about homosexuality will take strength—God’s strength—in order to see it through to the end. We are needy of God’s power and strength for this process and we hold up our bowls to receive it.

Fourth, we need what it takes “to endure everything with patience.” We need endurance and patience for this process together. The scripture acknowledges that this kind of communal discernment process isn’t easy…it is something to endure. It’s going to take a lot of patience to take the time we need to listen to one another and to the Spirit, in order to come to a congregational decision. We hold our bowls to receive what we need to endure with patience.

But notice in verse 11-12 what Paul says accompanies enduring everything with patience….joyfully giving thanks to God for enabling you to share in this body of saints. Paul prays for the Colossians to endure everything…all the while giving thanks to God for the gift of being part of this community. Enduring this process isn’t some grim slugging it out. In the thick of everything that is going to require patience, Paul suggests that we joyfully remember and give thanks to God for the blessings of being part of God’s saint. We pray for what it takes to endure and to joyfully give thanks at the same time. Because in the end, this scripture affirms that it is God who has rescued us all from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son, Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who has and is redeeming us all and forgiving our sins.

So, it is, that you are called to prayer today—called to admit our need in a posture of holding out our bowl to God together. Asking God to fill it with whatever we need for this discernment process together. In the spirit of this scripture, 1) we hold out our bowl for spiritual wisdom and understanding of what God wants, 2) to receive what it takes to lead lives that are worthy of our Lord Jesus, 3) to be made strong with strength that comes from God, and 4) to be prepared to endure with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to God.

The “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love” statement pledges that committing ourselves to prayer not only means admitting our needs, but also, committing ourselves to pray for a mutually satisfactory solution. It specifies that there can be no prayers for my
success and for the other to change, but to find a joint way. This call to prayer is a call to engage in prayer for us together, not for my way over your way.

We already know that we don’t agree on what our response to membership for gays and lesbians should be. Some of us are very clear that all homosexual behavior is sin and therefore do not support receiving members who are in homosexual relationships. Some of us are pretty sure that committed, monogamous relationships of gays or lesbians are not sin and therefore see no reason why these folks shouldn’t be welcomed as members. Some of us aren’t sure if homosexual behavior is wrong or not, and we’re undecided on this membership question.

This call to prayer invites all of you, wherever you are personally right now on this matter, to join together in holding up our common Frazer bowl to God, asking God to lead us to a mutually satisfactory solution. All of us are needed to lift up our bowl together. As a symbol of our continued prayer, this bowl will be present in our worship space. You will be hearing more about specific times and ways to pray over the next months. We’re going to begin today by joining in prayer now with two or three people near you. Offer up prayers aloud or silently, for our discernment process together.

We want to bathe this whole process in prayer—not just sprinkling it with a little prayer, not just pouring a little prayer over it today, but bathing it—immersing the process in prayer all along the way. This is a not a quick bath, but a good, healthy soaking in prayers to God that do not cease. Will you join together in bathing this discernment process in prayer?