

5th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 6.24.18
Scripture:

Romans 13:1-14

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. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant 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 servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due to 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.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

John 19:1-11

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. ²And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. ³They kept coming up to him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and striking him on the face. ⁴Pilate went out again and said to them, 'Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.' ⁵So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man!' ⁶When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.' ⁷The Jews answered him, 'We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.'

⁸ Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. ⁹He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, 'Where are you from?' But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰Pilate therefore said to him, 'Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?' ¹¹Jesus answered him, 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.'

Jeff Sessions would cite us to the apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans thirteen. So let's depart from the lectionary readings for this, the fifth Sunday after Pentecost, and submit to the chief law enforcement officer of our land. Let's go to the apostle Paul and his clear and wise command. "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." Clear and wise, and also true, as far as it goes—authority does come from God, who is the ultimate authority, the God and author of all history and creation. That all authority, then, is an expression of true authority, that all governance and social order are related to, and relative to, God's absolute governance and ordering of all things: this is true, as far as it goes. It just doesn't go nearly as far as Mr. Sessions seems to want it to go.

Paul's Letter to the Romans is his most studied, most majestic letter. Likely written late in his career, though prior to his arriving in Rome or ever visiting the congregations there, this letter represents as a sort of *summa theologica*, the summation of all of his groundbreaking theological thinking and formulating.

And groundbreaking it was. Consider, to bring together the theological expression of the revelation of the old covenant and the revelation of the new, to bring into the same room the Law of Moses and the gospel of Jesus: this was an intellectual task that has few correlates in human civilization. And I'd venture the bet that no one intellect can claim credit for contributing to a greater and more sustained cultural shift than the apostle Paul. His civilizational accomplishment should astonish us all.

That said, though, he was also writing in arresting specifics. Truly, he was one specific man writing to several specific congregations each found in specific locations and each dealing with some specific issue or issues, which makes our considering them that much more a complex project. That these letters speak abiding theological insights into what ever prove themselves to be eternal truths while also speaking to issues and arguments taking place on the ground, in Corinth, in Galatia, in Philippi, in Rome: these transcendent and imminent perspectives combined make the reading of these artifacts incredibly complex.

This is true for all ancient holy writ. The question people of faith bring to their sacred texts in their acts of devotion should always twofold: "What does this passage have to say to us this morning, and what does it *not* have to say to us this morning? That is, what circumstances specific

to the original context of this text make it so it's at least somewhat irrelevant to us 21st century Americans?" This two-fold question is always tricky, but is all the trickier to ask when it comes to letters written by one person to a people, and written with perhaps little notion that these would be read as authoritative a decade hence, a century hence, a millennium hence, *two* millennia hence.

Jeff Sessions got sloppy on this albeit complex project. But to give him his due, he had other things on his mind than careful hermeneutics when he cited his "church friends" to Romans 13. This, of course, he did as a counter to their objection to the separation of children from their families on the southwestern border while seeking asylum. He wasn't thinking in terms of hermeneutics, though—not when the power-grab he was making a go at was so close at hand, a move that those watching him closer than I know him to have been waiting his whole career to make. Giddy is one word I've seen used a lot in describing his demeanor as of late. That he might finally find himself in the position to act on his profound racism and xenophobia: giddy!

(I imagine this is why he's been willing to withstand the abuse on Twitter that Trump has unleashed on him—a small price to pay for finally getting his un-American way. As for his reliance on the Bible to justify it all, comedian Seth Myers imagined the apostle Paul grumbling from heaven, "Dude, leave me the f--- out this.")

The congregations in Rome were, after all, facing a different set of difficulties than we Americans are now when it comes to policies on immigration and assimilation. Theirs was a migrant crisis, too, but it was a crisis of homecoming rather than of leave-taking, a crisis of reclaiming one's rightful place rather than fleeing and seeking refuge, asylum. Rome, under Claudius' reign, had seen its Jewish population expunged, expelled as they were from the city in the 40s, expelled by imperial decree. This meant Jewish-Christians, too—so, members of Rome's mixed (Jewish and Gentile) congregations were cast out by half. Under Nero, though, in the 50s, Jews were allowed back into the city. So they came, returned. But, of course, any such return was going to involve friction, conflict. The Gentile Christians had remained, and had become comfortable in their congregations. The return, then, of the Jews brought about clashes, which Paul, by letter, meant to help them iron out.

The crux of the matter for Paul in his thinking about the Roman churches was about the relation of God's law, the Torah, to the out-pouring of God's grace, the gospel. Because, really, if

God's grace is given even unto sinners, as Paul testified it was, then what good was there in obeying the Law—which came to mean both the law of God and the law of the land? If grace is a given, then who cares about any law?

This question set before Paul was all the more pressing given the mess the congregations of Corinth had found themselves in. A port city that was a stopping point for trade routes the world over, Corinth was already an anything-goes kind of place. With a mix of people and languages and cultures, with an intermixing of strangers all using the city as a stopover, there was hardly anything in Corinth that was beyond the pale. Here, then, the good news of God's freeing grace wasn't nearly as good as Paul, a once Pharisee, might have felt it to be and might have intended to be. Paul had known stricture. Paul had known Godly fear. But these Corinthians *hadn't*. So he was preaching liberty among libertines, and *that* is a particular art—liberty as *not* meaning simply getting to do whatever you want whenever you want, but as freedom to serve the Lord, freedom to choose the good. Liberty as meaning the freedom to choose self-restraint for the sake of society, self-giving for the sake of the other: this is freedom in the Lord.

For this sociable, responsible, *obedient* sort of living by grace, Paul offered a whole litany of commands as to how members of Christian congregations ought to conduct themselves. They were relevant then to those specifics in Rome. As it happens, and as I've considered them, they seem relevant still, which is why we recite them frequently as a Call to Worship because, even if no one else here needs reminding, I do—that his is how you do the gospel, this is how you live by grace, which is freely given but which also we're to live as to express.

Paul's threading of this needle, that the givenness of God's grace is relative to the lawful ordering of human society, is summed up nicely in a bumper sticker I have yet to commit my bumper to but do admire: "Jesus loves you. Everything else thinks you're a jerk." In other words, you are beloved as you are, and this should make you want to behave a bit better than you've been doing.

So, we recited much of his litany again this morning, not as a denial of the givenness of God's grace but as inspiration for living that grace out: "Let love be genuine. Resist what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope. Contribute to the needs of your fellow members. Show hospitality to strangers." And, yes, "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.” Because the fact of the matter is we need structures of authority in the world; we need governance for the sake of human thriving. The fact is that places where civilization has broken down are dreary places, even dangerous place or worse still dehumanizing places. Thus it is that we can take as given God’s granting authority to be exercised on earth, for the sake of human being and thriving.

So, for goodness’ sakes, obey the speed limit—even in Tyringham where it’s forty miles per hour going in one direction but thirty-five going in the other direction, which doesn’t make any sense to you, but it’s really not up to you, so just do it.

And don’t vandalize your neighbor’s house even though you might want to and you could get away with it. Don’t even string toilet paper in his trees. Not even on Halloween. C’mon. Grow up.

And don’t drink alcohol in public parks, or smoke pot, because that just makes everything sort of icky, like by the dock where we launch our boats for rowing in Pittsfield, which is often crowded with people swimming and “partying,” even though it says it’s private property and even though we ask them to move when we need to use it and even though we point out that the equipment, big and awkward, could injure them if they don’t get out of the way. And I’ve had many ugly encounters with people who simply refuse to honor our rightfulness in being there, to say nothing of their wrongfulness in being there, and it’s a drag, but I really don’t want to call the police because why does it have to come to that? The times when it has come to that, though, those whom the cops cleared off seemed to feel themselves harassed by it all, but they wouldn’t have been if they’d just gotten out of our way for the few minutes we needed. So, please, just do it.

All right? Do you understand?

“But,” you’re saying. “But, but the situation at the border is something else altogether.”

I know. I know. So we should do as Jeff Sessions failed to do, which is recognize that Paul’s assertion that whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed is one narrow assertion put forth amidst a long-standing tradition of civil disobedience. Really, beginning with the midwives of Pharaoh’s Egypt who’d been ordered to kill the newborns of Israelite slave women, civil disobedience is as persistent a biblical theme as hospitality for the stranger or love for the neighbor.

These midwives refused the order because they, as Exodus 1:17 says, "feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live." And as to the fate they suffered for their disobedience, it says in verse 20, "God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and grew strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families."

See, God's authority and human authority, though related, aren't always in accord. It's an obvious point. It's funny it's lost on Jeff Sessions. To say otherwise it to make the state equal in power and authority to the divine. And you know who really hates this sort of assertion, that the state is God? Evangelical Christians. It's why they hated Communism so much. It's why they hate North Korea. So it's an assertion bound to fail when you make to your "church friends," namely Evangelical Christians.

John Piper, an American evangelical writing in 1981 in a paper he entitled, "The Limits of Submission to Man," called forth two more examples from the Old Testament, both from the book of Daniel.

"King Nebuchadnezzar made a royal decree that all who heard his music must fall down and worship the golden image of his god. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to obey the edict. So they were thrown into the fiery furnace. But God miraculously saved them and thus put his stamp of approval on their civil disobedience."

Then there was King Darius, who established "an edict that for thirty days no one could make a petition to any god or man other than Darius himself. Daniel, [though]...went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem; and he got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God... the result [of which] was that he was thrown to the lions. But again God shows his approval of Daniel's disobedience by saving him from the lion's mouth."

The New Testament only continues to theme. When, according to the book of Acts, Peter and John were arrested by the religious authorities and commanded not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus, and when, following their going on doing so, the high priest summoned them and said to them, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us," Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men."

Then, of course, there's the moment when, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus was brought before Pilate, the highest civil authority in Jerusalem—and neither intimidated nor cowed nor impressed in any way, Jesus had Pilate in sudden need of asserting himself: “Do you not know that I have the power to release you, and the power to crucify you?” which Jesus did know, but also defied, for Pilate had no power over him as it had not been granted from above.

Other writers of the New Testament understood the complicated relationship between civil authority and the divine law of love. The First Letter of Peter includes this injunction: “Let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or a wrongdoer or a mischief-maker; yet if one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but under that name let him glorify God.” Of this, John Piper wrote, “Just as we may have to disobey the civil authorities for Christ's sake, so all our obedience should be for his sake as well. We never have two masters.”

Jeff Sessions' plundering of Paul's litany for one pull-quote is something I hope evangelical leaders will not tolerate. I know I won't. The state, for all its arrogance and aggression, will never in my mind supersede the authority of God as revealed in creation, history and tradition, scripture, and personal revelation—the classic four.

And, yes, of course I'll obey the speed limit. (I've really been trying on this point.) I'll avoid vandalizing my neighbor's property. I'll pay taxes and license my dogs and get my car inspected. I will even embark on the difficult, nuanced conversation we must have about the fact that we aim to be an attractive country for people who seek freedom and opportunity in life and amidst a world full of repressive regimes and broken-down societies, that we need immigrants who have always been the key to our societal success, that we need them more now as our native-born population is in decline, and that open borders are not a realistic option and that the question of assimilation is an ever-relevant one.

But I will never consider God-blessed systematic cruelty set upon some of the world's most vulnerable people and as a deterrent that fellow human beings in need of asylum won't even bother trying to find it here. And I will not be swayed by the argument that the circumstances of these young detainees are pretty good. They get three meals a day. They get a bed (sometimes) and a blanket. The point is they've been separated by the state from their parents so it wouldn't matter if they were detained in a place as fancy as Trump tower. Their parents are not with them, and that is all that matters.

Really, I will *always* listen to the cries of a child over the “reasonable” arguments of a powerful man or woman.

I hope you will too.

Ruth Graham, writing in Slate, traced the recent history of Romans 13, which she noticed stretches further back than just these last two weeks. It’s long been “used as a cudgel against civil disobedience. It was hotly debated in revolutionary America, when some pastors withdrew from revolt because they believed Romans 13 mandated it. (Contemporary conservative Bible teacher John MacArthur has written that the Revolution defied Paul’s instruction, and therefore ‘the United States was actually born out of a violation of the New Testament principles.’) In the 19th century, defenders of slavery argued that Romans 13 mandated obedience to the Fugitive Slave Act. In the 1930s and 1940s, some European church leaders used the passage to encourage submission to Hitler. White Christians in apartheid South Africa frequently used it to defend the status quo.”

As a corrective to this misuse, Ms. Graham writes of Matthew Arbo, director of the Center for Faith and Public Life at Oklahoma Baptist University, who “points out that the passage places God as the appointer of authorities, but not the appointer of specific laws. ‘One is not obligated to respect any and everything an authority orders simply because an authority orders it,’ he said. ‘If the authority commands what is evil, then naturally no one should uphold it, Christian included.’ As Augustine put it in the fourth century, echoing Paul [she wrote]: An unjust law is no law at all.”

I would like our chief law enforcement officer to know this. He has a tricky job. I would like him to know just how tricky it is. I hope all his “church friends” continue to tell him.

Thanks be to God.