

6th Sunday after Pentecost
Romans 13:1-10 (departing from lectionary)
July 1, 2018

The Bible Tells Me What?

Those of you attuned to such things will notice that Tip did not read the Epistle Lesson assigned for this day by the lectionary. The lectionary is a useful guide and very often a demanding taskmaster, but it is not, as the children in the preschool would say, “the boss of me.” There are very few decisions a Presbyterian pastor can make without consulting the session. One of them is the selection of scripture to be read in worship. (Another is the choice of hymns, but for that I’d be a fool not to work with that guy back there on the organ bench.)

To be perfectly transparent, it was not I, but my brother in Christ, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who prompted this departure from liturgical conformity.

As he was defending President Trump’s “zero-tolerance” policy on immigration, and as agents of the United States government were ripping children from their mother’s arms and sending them off to detention centers hundreds of miles away, Brother Jeff cited the opening verses of Romans, Chapter 13.

“I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order. Orderly and lawful processes are good in themselves and protect the weak and lawful.”¹

Later, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders reiterated. “It is very biblical to enforce the law,” she said.²

Brother Jeff and sister Sarah, who are both self-professed Christians, are not the first to quote Romans 13 in defense of the *status quo*. The supporters of King George did that back in 1776, and Presbyterian John Witherspoon, the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence, was very much aware of that text.

¹ Religion News Service, June 16, 2018

² Ibid.

Before the outbreak of the Civil War in 1860, Presbyterians in the South used Romans 13 to justify slavery, and a hundred years later, that passage was often quoted by those who opposed the civil disobedience of Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders.

Brother Jeff and Sister Sarah join a long line of public figures who have used Romans 13 to defend the laws they like, whether they be the divine right of kings, chattel slavery, or Jim Crow voting restrictions. It's not a new tactic. Proof texting is as old as the Bible itself.

However, if you're going to quote scripture in defense of public policy, it's a good idea to look at the context of the passage you are quoting. As a Christian who takes the Bible seriously, surely Brother Jeff knows the context of Romans 13. I'm sure he won't mind if we go over that just now.

The Apostle is writing to Christians in Rome – folks he has not yet met. The sitting Emperor is Nero (Yes, that Nero – the one who is supposed to have fiddled while Rome burned). About five years earlier, Emperor Claudius had banned many Jews from Rome. As Paul is writing, a lot of those Jews are coming back to Rome, and some of them have converted to Christianity.

Jews in the Roman Empire are already suspect because they don't pay homage to the Emperor as a god, as the law requires. To be a newly-minted Christian as well as a Jew in first century Rome is not a way to win friends and influence people.

So, if you are a Jew and a Christian as well, how should you behave under this new Emperor named Nero? That's one of the issues Paul addresses in chapters 12 – 15 of his letter.

Matters are complicated by the fact that Paul already has a reputation as a trouble-maker. Remember how Paul's preaching caused riots in Ephesus and Jerusalem? Paul needs to be careful. His name is probably on a "no fly" list as he sits down to write.

With all this in mind, Paul advises the Christians in Rome:

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 . . .

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.

Not only is this admonition in keeping with the advice of other rabbis at the time. It is also a good way for Christians in Rome to fly beneath the Emperor's radar.

To take Paul's words out of this first-century context and apply them to families fleeing for their lives in 21st century America is more than a stretch. It's a blatant misuse of scripture. By using this passage to justify a policy which tears families apart and traumatizes little children, Brother Jeff reveals either a profound ignorance of scripture or a willingness to bend God's word to his own political advantage.

Few concepts are clearer in scripture than God's compassion for the immigrant, the sojourner, and the alien amongst us. Leviticus 19 is but one of many expressions of God's expectations of us.

When the alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien . . . shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 19:33-34 and 24:22).

Brother Sessions left that bit of scripture out, didn't he? He also left out the rest of Romans, Chapter 13, where Paul moves from Nero's law to a higher law, the law of love:

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.

Our nation needs laws, beloved. Of course it does. Our nation also needs compassion. It needs the love of neighbor that fulfills the law. It needs the love of the alien who is our neighbor.

I wonder, does Brother Jeff Sessions really think that the Apostle Paul, whose ministry ended in a Roman prison, would sanction the confining of children in chain-length cages while their parents despair of ever seeing them again? Does my brother in Christ really think that’s what the Bible tells us to do?

This Wednesday we will celebrate the Glorious Fourth. When the signers of the Declaration of Independence put their names to that document, there were in clear violation of the opening verses of Romans 13 – at least that’s the way King George saw it.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. wrestled with this passage while imprisoned in the Birmingham jail, he concluded that it is the Christian’s duty to obey just laws and to oppose unjust laws, even if that opposition should lead to arrest and imprisonment. Sometimes civil disobedience is required to fulfill the law of love.

Perhaps by now Brother Jeff has learned that applying scripture out of context is not such a good idea. Doing so can prompt people to read beyond the verses you have quoted and to encounter the whole of God’s word in scripture. That includes God’s word made flesh in Jesus Christ, who welcomed the children, who blessed the children, who told us that it is to the children that the kingdom of God belongs.

God bless the children. God bless our nation’s leaders. And God bless America.