

8 November 2020

As Free People

1 Peter 2:13-17

Our scripture today is from 1 Peter chapter 2, verses 13-17:

¹³Be subordinate to every human institution for the Lord's sake, whether to a king as your superior, ¹⁴or to governors as those who have been sent by him to exact justice from evildoers and to praise those who do what is good; ¹⁵for this is God's will: to silence the ignorance of the foolish by doing the good, ¹⁶as free persons – and not as persons using that freedom as a cloak for evil, but rather as slaves of God. ¹⁷Give honor to everyone, love the brotherhood, revere God, honor the king.

The start of this passage is harsh and unwelcome, at least to our ears. Obey the king – or emperor – and also all the governors that are under the king, because God is the one who put them there, so as to keep order in society. If we make a one-to-one transfer of this instruction to our own time and context, we get a command to be subservient to our president and to our governor, because they have both been put in their positions by God. (Something in there to infuriate every Wisconsinite, huh?) But this scripture is even stranger than that. 1 Peter was written to a church that was experiencing active persecution, which was either winked at or even encouraged by the Roman authorities. So this isn't just a call to suck it up and endure policies that you don't agree with; this is a command to be obedient and respectful to people who might any day, on a whim, have you or your family tossed in prison for being a Christian. As I say – a strange passage to our ears. And at the end of a week like we've just had, where half a nation is angry about an election, it's infuriating. "You're telling me that God chose *that* man as president!"

Well, no. I'm not. There are a lot of reasons for us to *not* do that one-to-one transfer from the Roman empire to our time. The Roman emperor was an absolute ruler who came to power through heredity or conquest, and in neither case were common people consulted. Maybe God could have some influence, but nobody reading that letter did. Accepting the emperor, however deranged he was – and some of them were *quite* deranged - was really the only option. Not so with us. We get to elect our leaders, and while our system for doing this isn't perfect, we at least have more say in the matter than did the Christians addressed in 1 Peter. So, no. We don't have to assume that God chooses our leaders; we do it to ourselves. Second, in the Roman empire, the idea of public opposition to the government was inconceivable. We, on the other hand, have the rights of free speech and assembly enshrined in our Constitution. We sometimes practice those rights imperfectly and respect them inconsistently, but they're there. Unlike people under the Roman emperor, we don't have to just nod compliance with everything our leaders say. So this is one of those times when we have to translate a teaching from a historical context to our own time, stripping away the parts that no longer apply to us in the same way. (And if that bothers you, let me point out that in the very next verses of our chapter, the author tells slaves to honor their masters even when those masters beat them. Yeah, we don't have to do that either. Since the first century, we've come up with a better idea: people shouldn't have slaves.)

But when we do that to scripture – peel back the historical context – we do it not so that we can ignore the passage entirely but so as to find what is still there for us underneath. Verses 15-17 again: *for this is God's will: to silence the ignorance of the foolish by doing the good, as free persons – and not as persons using that freedom as a cloak for evil, but rather as slaves of*

God. Give honor to everyone, love the brotherhood, revere God, honor the king. Having granted that the secular government has an important role – keeping order – the author goes on to stress that we as Christians have a prior loyalty. We are slaves of God, and as such we are free persons.

Wait, how are slaves free? We are free from bondage to this world's demands because as God's slaves we have committed ourselves to a greater authority, whose standards are immeasurably higher than those of any mere human institution. Look, the author says, I know you're being accused of all sorts of things, but if you live as followers of Christ, you will make all your accusers look foolish. You will automatically be the best citizens, best family members, best neighbors anywhere, because our own standards as slaves of God surpass the expectations of good citizenship. A good citizen is expected to respect other people's property and not steal; a follower of Christ is expected to care for others' needs – if they don't have enough, give. A good citizen respects others' rights; a slave of God respects others' dignity as people loved by God. A good citizen is expected to tolerate those who are different; a follower of Christ is expected to love them. Mere tolerance is kid stuff; we love. What 1 Peter is telling those persecuted Christians is just to do what they were supposed to do anyway: live like Christ. Give honor to everyone. Love the family of faith. Revere God. Honor the king.

One more time, to summarize, we are being told to acknowledge the authority of human government and recognize that it serves a purpose. But our focus is not to be on that superficial level. All our joys, all our hopes, all our dreams are to be focused on a prior and higher commitment. We serve God, not the government. Serving God will make us great subjects to the earthly ruler, but that's not the point. The point is: we serve God first.

So what *does* all this mean for us, today, in the election-torn United States? Because it's a little rough right now. And not just the past week. The past year at least has been a bleak and depressing time of division and suspicion and exaggerated fear. In one survey I encountered last week, conducted among an equal number of Republicans and Democrats, fully 70% of those surveyed believed that if the other party's presidential candidate was elected, that would spell the end of America. Think about that for a moment. You may be one of those who had that thought. Chances are you were. But were you aware that as much as a third of America felt the same dread regarding the person that you voted for? There's no middle ground there. Much of America approached this last election not as a choice between candidates but as a choice between survival or disaster. When political sides get that absolute, they tend to take on the tone of religious fanaticism, and when politics dresses up as religion, we have a problem.

I read an article recently about "Christian Nationalist" churches in the south. Generally non-denominational, these churches have been formed not only with religious but political goals and for the past year or so have been teaching that the continued existence of Christ's was dependent on the re-election of President Trump. And, while Vice-president Biden's supporters have not been as obvious in their religious nationalism – maybe because Christians make up a smaller percentage of the Democratic Party – there have still been plenty of Democrats from the church willing to declare unequivocally that true followers of Jesus Christ could not with integrity vote for anyone except Biden. People on both sides have laid proprietary claim to Christ and have tacitly consigned all those on the other side to the outer darkness where the worm does not die and the fire is not extinguished.

Snap out of it. All of you.

As followers of Christ, we have a prior and a greater loyalty than to the United States of America. We are first – as Paul puts it in Philippians – citizens of heaven. This should, at the very least, give us some perspective. We belong to a community that has existed ten times as long as the USA, and that will continue to exist long after this nation is gone. That community has survived far worse times than ours: it will survive an election. Moreover, within that community of faith, we are bound to a commitment that is deeper, harder, and more liberating than our commitments to any human institution: the commitment to love God with all we are and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Over the past, shall we say, at least four years, we have forgotten that. And when we lose that perspective and forget who we really belong to and what our real task is, we screw things up. When we confuse our loyalty to Christ with our loyalty to our earthly nation – let alone to one political party or candidate within that nation – then we diminish Christ and defile Christ's church. And if we permit our loyalty to a political institution to get in the way of our core command to love others, then we have exchanged the glory of immortal God for the basest of idols. (Romans 1:23) Do not bow before that defiling altar.

So what are we supposed to do? Well, some of you are disappointed at the results of the election. You may feel that America as we know it will collapse in the next few years. For all I know, you may be right. That would be sad, but at another level, it doesn't change a thing. You still belong first to Christ, and your first task is to love God and others, and you know what? If you're right and society collapses, there will be a lot of people who need to know that love. Others of you are overjoyed at the election results. You may feel that disaster has been averted, and now things are going to be all right. No, they aren't. Even if you're right and things do, in fact, get somewhat better in America now, you are still commanded to help the helpless, love the unlovely, give to the ungrateful, set the prisoner free. And you will still have plenty of opportunity to live this calling. It would appear that whether our candidate won or lost, we still have a shared and common task. In that sense, not one blamed thing has changed.

And so, once again, to all of you – and to myself – I say what we have forgotten for the most part for the interminable years of the American election: Give honor to all people. Love each other. Revere God. Show respect to our leaders.

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Jesus specifically commanded us to love God, our neighbors, each other, and – just to make sure we understood who “neighbors” included – commanded us to love our enemies. Here are some of the things Jesus did not command us to love: our government, our homeland, our religion. Now, he didn't say *not* to love those things, and as far as I'm concerned, love is hard work and we can use any practice we can get, so go ahead. Just one thing though. Never forget the loves that we are commanded, and do not let our practice loves get in the way of our divine task. So if, for instance, our love for our country prevents us from loving our neighbor, we need to sort some things out. I'll be sorting for a while. I hope you'll join me.