

27 October 2024

Strangers in a Strange Land: Our Second Loyalty

Romans 13:1-7

Our reading today comes from Paul's letter to the Romans chapter 13, verses 1-7:

13 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. ²Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For 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; ⁴for 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. ⁵Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. ⁶For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. ⁷Pay 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.

Last week suggested that, as Christians, we live in two parallel kingdoms, two overlapping cities. We live in the City of God, which is our true and ultimate home, even while our daily lives take place primarily in the secular city, where we work and play and shop and eat and interact with others. The secular city provides our livelihoods; the City of God provides our meaning and values. In the secular city, we live our political and economic and cultural lives; in the City of God we find the Faith, Hope, and Love that gives us strength and purpose as we do so. I also said that, since we have this dual citizenship, we owe certain duties to both of our cities. As Jesus put it, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's."

Okay, so what exactly is that? What duties do we – whose citizenship is in heaven, as Paul says – owe to our earthly government? Well, here in Romans 13, Paul gives us a list: (1) obey the governing authorities, (2) respect those authorities as people who are doing the work of God, specifically, keeping the peace by punishing wrongdoers, and (3) pay your taxes. And, I should add, this isn't just Paul. Last week we read 1 Peter 2, verses 9-12. If we had read the next five verses, we would have seen this: *For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.* To put 1 Peter and Romans together, our Apostolic forebears tell us to be the best citizens of our earthly cities that we can possibly be. Obey the laws of the land you live in. Pay all the taxes you are charged. Show respect to the leaders of that land. Make sure that no one has any cause to question the loyalty of followers of Christ to the state.

Hm. Some of you may have some questions about this. For instance, *What if I can't respect a leader? What if **that** candidate is elected?* The fact is, in a couple of weeks (or whenever we know the final results), no matter what happens, some 40% of our country is going to be faced with having a leader for whom they have little or no respect. What do we do with that? "Really, Paul? Seriously, Peter?" we might want to say, "You haven't seen what we're stuck with!" No, they haven't. They've seen much worse. They lived during the reigns of Emperors

Caligula and Nero, both of whom were sociopaths who had absolute unchecked power. Nero's brutality toward Christians was particularly awful. Paul spent a significant time in Roman prisons. Both Peter and Paul lived with the daily expectation of being arrested and even executed by the Roman emperor, and in the end both were. Yet they still say, "Show honor to the emperor." They are *not* saying, "Show honor to them because they are honorable men." They are saying, "Show honor to their authority and live in peace."

We are much better off than that. We have the privilege of living in a democracy. Paul and Peter had to accept whoever the emperor was for as long as that emperor lived. They had no recourse if they didn't like their governing authorities. But that's not our situation, so let me see if I can adapt their 1st century instructions for us, living in a representative democracy. We are told to be the best possible citizens of the land in which we live. What does that mean? Well, it still means obey the laws. Even the stupid ones: the No U-Turn sign where there is absolutely no reason not to make a U-Turn. Second, pay your taxes. Third, show respect to the offices of our government leaders whether you respect the individuals in those offices or not. Even on Facebook. So far, this is familiar. I've just repeated Paul and Peter. But in a democracy, something that neither apostle could have imagined, there's more to being a good citizen. First, vote. We have a privilege: use it. Early voting is already open here in Wisconsin. Second, accept the results of elections. None of us are going to like *everyone* who wins. That's how we know democracy is working. If you don't, feel free to start working toward the mid-terms. Third, we have the right – again, unimaginable to the apostles – of speaking out against the government. Do so, if you wish, but respectfully. There are surely other ways for us to adapt to our time the apostles' advice on how to live in peace in the secular city, but these are the ones that feel most pertinent this week. Be good citizens. Be respectful. Honor the governing authorities. Vote. Don't make that U-turn.

But that's just our duty to the secular city. Remember we also live in the City of God, and we have duties to that city as well. And those duties are harder. Here is a sampling: first, love your neighbor, even if your neighbor's election yard signs are for the *other* candidate. I read a column in the *New York Times* called "Ask the Ethicist." People send in their ethical dilemmas to a professor of ethics. A couple of weeks ago the question was: "I just found out that our dog-walker is a Trump supporter. Ethically, do I need to find a different dog-walker?" Yes, that's how bad it's gotten. I forget exactly what the Ethicist said, but here's what I wanted to say, "Why don't you ask your dog if she cares? And then maybe spend some time reflecting on why your dog is more gracious than you." The only good thing I can think of about our divisive, judgmental, vitriolic political environment is that it is a great opportunity for us citizens of the City of God to show that we are different. Here's another one: if someone treats you to an angry political tirade – whether in person, by phone, or online – do not argue. (Remember "Turn the other cheek?") Listen respectfully, but do return tirade for tirade. Living in the secular city can be hard, and the past couple of months have been rough on all of us. But we have a resource that others do not have. We have one foot in the kingdom of God, and it is from that kingdom that we take our values, our purpose, our sense of self. And that kingdom is the one that determines how we treat others.

But I need to turn to one more matter before concluding this sermon and sermon series. Some of you may have noticed an apparent contradiction earlier in the sermon. Paul says to obey the laws of the governing authorities, and if you do, you'll be fine, but I also said that Paul spent a lot of time in prison. Wait, why was Mr. Law-Abiding-Citizen always in jail? Well, he was

charged with a lot of different things, but they mostly had to do with him proclaiming the gospel of the resurrection of Jesus Christ even when he had been commanded to stop. In fact, a lot of law-abiding Christians ended up in jail. One of the laws of Rome was that everyone was required to bow before an image of the emperor, acknowledging that he was a god. And Christians refused to obey that law. This “obey the laws of the governing authorities” stuff has a limit. When the law of the secular city demands that we reject our service to the City of God, then the City of God comes first, whatever the consequences.

Indeed some of the most inspiring moments of our Christian history are the stories of people who set their loyalty to the City of God and the commands to love God and neighbor above the laws of this world. I think of Harriet Tubman and the other Christians of the Underground Railroad who helped slaves escape bondage. I think of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr, and his predominantly Christian leaders who led the peaceful law-breaking of the Civil Rights Movement. I think of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his Christian leaders who refused to acknowledge the laws of Apartheid in South Africa. We have a primary loyalty to God.

We need to remember that, because without that detail, Romans 13 can be troubling. There were Southern preachers in the 19th century who used this passage to support slavery – which was, after all, the law of the land – and Southern Christians in the 1960s who used it as an excuse to not get involved in the Civil Rights movement. Segregation is the law; Paul says to obey the law. There were Christian pastors in Germany in the 1930s who used Romans 13 to tell their parishioners to go along with the Nazis. When we get our loyalties confused and place our loyalty to the state above our commitment to Christ, the result is idolatry.

For four weeks now, we’ve been thinking together about this uneasy place that we Christians have in the world: living in it, and yet never fully a part of it; going to the same jobs and grocery stores and gyms and coffee shops as everyone else, but seeing it all through different eyes. This does not mean we don’t love our nation. We do. We seek to be the best citizens we know how to be. We honor our veterans, pay our taxes, obey the laws of the country, and vote. We root for the USA at the Olympics – even (shudder) the Men’s Soccer Team. But all that is still a secondary loyalty. We have a prior commitment to our Creator and Redeemer, which is why today we turn to God and pray for our nation. America, America: God shed his grace on thee, and crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea. Amen.