

Sermon Text for November 13, 2016

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Judges 4:4-10, Romans 13:1-7

So we find ourselves on the others side of the election. As I mentioned before, I am so grateful to be finished with it, and I was very surprised by the result. If one thing is certain, all of us were surprised by the result, both campaigns have said as such. In fact, I was so certain of what the outcome would be that my first Scripture was a reflection of my certainty. The judge Deborah is put in power by God to rule over Israel as commander in chief and prophet. Well, I'm certain that we can find some use for that Scripture today as well.

Today we celebrate our church's 184th birthday. During that time this church has seen 38 Presidents. When we began as an organized body of believers Andrew Jackson was president, a president who had killed someone in a duel and had served in the American Revolution. Our church has seen a civil war sweep through this nation. Our church has seen a President impeached and leave office in disgrace before his term was over. I think these historical truths that we hear, that people just like you sat in these very same pews and were dealing with political realities that were hard to believe, might be some consolation to those who think our nation is on the brink of collapse, and to others who think a new day is dawning and that we have never seen anything like this before in our history. As the author of Ecclesiastes states in chapter 1:9 – what has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.

But today all of us gather with the question, now what? How do we relate to those who are in power and how do we as Christians live in a reality where being a Christians seems to have been redefined in this election. Being a follower of Jesus Christ has taken on a completely different definition in conjunction with politics this electoral season than what we have ever seen before.

Today's Scripture is a Scripture that nations, including our founders, revolutionaries, reformists and others have used to describe God's role in government, and our role in interacting with the government as disciples of Jesus Christ. Let's read Romans 13:1-7 and keep in mind that this Scripture, more than any other in the Bible, has been used by politicians, by ordinary citizens to defend or oppose governments and their actions.

I have received a number of emails from you in regards to the enews that I wrote this past week. None of the emails I received were celebratory, quite a few of them were concerned that I didn't address the concerns and the fear that so many people have in our nation now as a result of the election. I understand that, and I have to admit that I find it impossible to separate what I feel as a person and as a pastor. They are one and the same. I trust the system in which we find ourselves, I know the history of this nation and the people who have been elected and the ensuing discontent and anger that has spilled out in protest on the streets both today and in the past.

The reason why I chose Judges was because here we find a perfect example where a general simply does not trust and refuses to obey the words of the commander in chief. Deborah commands Barak to lead the troops in a certain direction and Barak responds by saying, I'll only do it if you do it. I'm not going to obey your orders if you don't lead the way. She does lead the way and reminds Barak, the general, that Israel is established upon the principles that God will be glorified and not any one individual.

But Paul in Romans, in these words of Scripture, he states let every person be subject to governing authorities,. The word subject does not leave much room for what we would call civil disobedience. When I was in college I helped start along with another half dozen of my college friends, a civil disobedience group. During the 1st Gulf War we made plans to go to channel 6 station in Philadelphia and some of us would lie down while the others would draw chalk lines around them mimicking dead bodies and then we would stay there until we were arrested. Well, we went, drew chalk lines, and we waited, and waited. Nobody cared, and there is nothing like apathy to break up a civil demonstration. After a few hours we got hungry so we left because it was obvious that we were not going to get arrested. Our Scripture is filled with people in the Bible who risked their very lives, disobeyed the governing authorities. Remember Daniel? He knew about the laws the king had passed but he went up to his room, with the windows open, in front of everyone and prayed. He knowingly disobeyed the king and his laws.

Think of Moses' family who disobeyed the death sentence for all Jewish males under Pharaoh, Esther who went to the king without being invited, Rahab who lied to the king and saved the Israelites, the Apostles who were constantly being thrown in jail, Jesus who was killed by the governing authorities for disobedience and for being a threat. Our Bible is a book filled with people who disobeyed the government, those in power, so that they could pursue the type of freedom in Jesus Christ, the Almighty God which is often at odds with those who had the earthly

power.

Paul, who was probably more in jail than he was out of it, and was probably in jail when he wrote this letter, says let everyone obey those authorities that are above you. What are you talking about? Don't you know these stories? Our very faith has been shaped over the years by civil disobedience, but this is only the case when it is substituted by obedience to God.

Romans 13 was used by the Lutheran Church in Germany before WWII to support and lend some theological teeth to Hitler. Romans 13 was used by the Reformed church in South Africa to uphold and enforce apartheid. Romans 13 has been used by the Roman Catholic Church to support the torture and killings of thousands during the Inquisition. The list goes on. Luther himself once said: Christians should not refuse, under the pretext of religion, to obey men, especially evil ones.

Isn't that a bit over the top. John Calvin used Romans 13 to incite a rebellion against the French king for he argued that their power was one which went against God's will. Likewise John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both alluded to Romans 13 in their support of the revolution by stating that the British were apostate and had given up the role of providence in their rule of the colonies.

Our nation found its identity as a nation by somehow skirting around Romans 13. Remember one of the issues that sent us to war was this whole idea of no taxation without representation. What does Paul say in Romans? He says pay your taxes. What does Jesus say about taxes in Mark? Pay your taxes. I think the driving force of our founding fathers was not Almighty God, but a yearning for freedom that was so strong that regardless of what the Scripture stated, their desire for freedom eclipsed and trumped the Word of God.

But there is some truth to Calvin and our founding fathers. They state that the government's purpose is one well defined by God and not all governments pursue those purposes and those which do not ought to be replaced. Look at psalm 72 and for me this psalm tells me what a government is supposed to do.

Again the emphasis is not on prosperity and safety but rather justice and righteousness must be the center of the reign. When a government seeks prosperity at the expense of the poor and the powerless, then that is not God's will. When the law is not enforced and justice is ridiculed, that has not been instituted by God. We are able to discern the godly and those leaders who do God's will, or as Paul states, God's appointed ruler not by the amount of quiet time and public prayers that we see, but by their defending the poor, delivering the needy. These are not

my words, but Scripture.

There is a real similar verse to Romans 13:1-7 and that is found in I Peter 2:13-17. The key verse here is: As servants of God, live as free people. Today, we are called to be free. Jesus said we shall know the truth and the truth shall set us free. The freedom that we enjoy as Americans on this earth is like no other found on this earth. But it cannot and it should not be compared to the freedom that we have in Jesus Christ.

Paul knew what he was saying in these verses. He was writing around the time that Christians were being fed to the lions in the Colosseum in Rome. When you go to the Colosseum in Rome now you can see on the side now a cross that is larger than life. It is there almost in defiance saying, there is no freedom greater than the freedom in Christ. You may kill the body, you may politically try to annihilate us, but we still are free.

So, now what? Let's take a look at history and at our faith and recognize that things are not spiraling out of control with this election. Let us obey the laws, pay our taxes, but always be vigilant, as Daniel was, to what defines us. Who we are as Christians are people whose desire first and foremost is that justice and righteousness will roll like waters in our own communities. May God bless us and keep us as we look to live out the promises that God has for us. Amen.