

Between Two Thirteens*

Romans 13:1-5; Revelation 13:1, 6-10; Acts 4:18-20

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Two weeks ago, the Attorney General of the United States Jeff Sessions was defending the federal government's immigration policy of separating families when he said, "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 the government for his purposes," Later, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders summed up the same idea: "It is very biblical to enforce the law."

There is so much that is wrong-headed and misguided about these statements that we could be here half of the day just to unpack them all. The Attorney General apparently believes that the government's policies and laws are the same as God's policies and laws. When Press Secretary Sanders says, "It is very biblical to enforce the law," it begs the question, "Whose law?" The laws of the United States or the law of God? They are not the same thing though governments across the ages have sought to convince everyone they are.

The response of God's people is to be and has been that we obey God and God's Ways no matter what the government says. Going back at least as far as the slave midwives Shiphrah and Puah in Exodus 1, who disobeyed the law of Pharaoh and refused to kill newborn Hebrew baby boys because as the Bible says, "The midwives feared God" (Ex. 1:17).

When the Attorney General says “God has ordained the government for his purposes,” I remind us that means the government is for God’s purposes. It does not mean that whatever the government says is law is God’s purposes. Very often the two – God’s purposes and government policy and law – are counter to each other. For example, sixty or seventy years ago it was the law of much of the land that people who were black could be discriminated against. It was the law. But God’s people, mostly black churches stood up and said “No! We follow a higher law, the law of God and we refuse to cooperate with your laws. And they went to jail for it, many were tortured and some died for it.

Governments as far back as Constantine, the emperor of Rome in 313 CE, have referred to Romans 13 for divine sanction and godly authority. And as far back as Constantine, they’ve been wrong.

Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant Reformed and Lutheran traditions have long been big on theories of how God uses the state and how we are to obey the state. Anabaptists and Baptists, and other churches coming out of the radical reformation and peace church traditions have been a bit more careful and even skeptical about granting too much of God’s authority to the government – any government. After the experience of Hitler, most churches of every kind reassessed their teachings on the role of government. Though, as we know all too well, there are many today who are loudly invigorated by the notion that because their Right Wing values are in power, therefore, it must be God’s will.

Very quickly, here are some summary statements for us to remember:

- (1) In Romans 13 to say that God “orders” or institutes ruling authorities simply means that God wants orderly government. God wants a kind of society in which, as a simple example, we know which side of the road to drive on and in which the law says we are to stop at red lights. Beyond that God wants a kind of order where it is easier to do good rather than bad, where it is easier to love your neighbor. Think about that for a moment. It seems that we increasingly have an order that makes it easier to do bad than to do good, and where hating our neighbor seems to be the law of the land. According to Romans 13, that calls into question any divine authority of the present government.
- (2) When Paul says let every person be subject to the governing authorities, or as another translation puts it, let every person submit, Paul is NOT saying that we are to obey the rulers in all things. To submit means to that our first calling as Christians is to follow Jesus Christ and if that is not against the rulers, then that’s fine. Sometimes we’re even involved with the ruling authorities by voting, running for office, etc. But other times it might mean breaking the law of the rulers, then so be it. We submit by going to jail. For most of us, going to jail for our faith and practice has never been a part of our lives or even in our minds. I raise the issue: we probably need to start thinking about it and praying and learning. Non-violent civil disobedience is not a theoretical or abstract concept anymore. What does loving our neighbors mean, when our neighbors are arrested, forcibly taken to detention centers and deported? What does loving our neighbors mean when our neighbors are yelled at, harassed, pulled over, arrested, shot, killed, thrown in jail, and in all kinds of ways treated hatefully?

(3) The New Testament talks in many ways about the state or the ruling authorities, Romans 13 is just one of them. For example, in both Matthew and Luke are temptation stories of Jesus in the wilderness being confronted by Satan. Satan says that if Jesus will bow down to him then Satan will give to Jesus all the kingdoms and governments of the world. Jesus turns the offer down but Jesus does not argue with Satan that the kingdoms and governments of the world belong to Satan or at least, Satan seems to be running them.

Another big example is part of our reading this morning: Revelation 13, in which the ruling authorities are shown to be predatory beasts that make war against the people of God. In history, those groups who benefit from the rulers always like to quote Romans 13, but those groups who have been hunted down, thrown in prison, and burned at the stake have tended to see government through the perspective of Revelation 13. Our radical Baptist tradition has tended to see both Romans 13 and Revelation 13 operating all the time. Revelation 13 is not simply about some future date; it was true in the past, it is true now, and it will be true in the future. Our calling is to discern how it is true and discern how we are to respond as Jesus followers.

Discernment is the essential. We are to discern the difference between the ruling powers of Revelation 13 and Romans 13, because it is not simply a matter of choosing between two clearly delineated options. Romans 13 and Revelation 13 tend to overlap. Or sometimes we live in between them. We live in the midst of the tension and even chaos at the juncture of where the two collide. In the confusion and cacophony we listen for God. In that in-between place, we have to discern God's work.

Later in Romans 13 beginning with verse 11, the Apostle Paul says, “Besides, you know what time it is, how it is the moment for you to wake from sleep.” The Revised English Bible translates verse 11 as, “Always remember that this is the hour of crisis.” The word for “moment” or “hour” is the Greek *kairos*, which is distinguished from *chronos*, ordinary time. *Kairos* time is time full of meaning, pregnant with possibility and challenge. Paul says the time has come for us to wake up and discern the *kairos*, to see through the events of the day and perceive what’s really going on, to discern the activities of God in and through those events. We are to learn to see differently and to see perceptibly, insightfully. We are to listen carefully. And here’s the deal: we believe that our discernment allows us to see and hear more truthfully. In other words, in the midst of much chaos, noise, conflict, and illusion we see reality; we hear the true Word of God.

In our reading from Acts 4 this morning, Peter and John have been hanging out with the beggars on the front steps of the Temple (notice who their companions are). And they are arrested for healing one of the beggars, and turning around and attributing that healing to the living and resurrected Jesus Christ, whom the ruling authorities had executed just a few months before. Peter and John are hauled into court by these same ruling authorities and told to shut up or else. They respond, “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge. But we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20).

Peter and John testify that they have seen and heard reality. They discern the truth that the love of God and the love of neighbor embodied in the living and resurrected Jesus Christ is what’s real. And they’re going to keep on talking and

preaching and practicing what they see and hear. The ruling authorities have to make their own decisions about what to do.

Theologian and pastor Carl Scovil has written that in the early days of Nazi rule, say between 1933 and 1936, what was most important to pastors and their churches in opposing the state was not courage but “the ability to perceive the issues at stake.” He said that before there was the sin that we call cowardice there was the sin of confusion. And before there was the virtue of what we call courage there was clarity (“Christian Responses to the Nazi State in Germany,” *Katallegete*, Spring 1978, p. 35).

We live between “two thirteens,” Romans 13 and Revelation 13. Our job, our calling is to perceive the issues at stake, to wake up and discern what God is doing in this world and then go and join it.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.

*Thanks to Rev. Fleming Rutledge for her sermon title “Between the Two Thirteens,” found in *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Sermons from Paul’s Letter to the Romans*.

“The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.” (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Invitation to the Table:

You are welcome to this sacred meal this morning. You do not have to be a member of Austin Heights Baptist Church or even a Baptist. It is here that Christians of all kinds have testified across the ages, that we know what’s real and what’s true – more than what the ruling authorities say, more than what the powerful say. Here, in the broken body and poured out blood of Jesus Christ shared among us, we are rooted, grounded, and renewed. We are nourished. Here is where we discern reality. Here is where we perceive what the stakes are.