

“A Slice of Romans, Part Four, “Authority”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for September 17th 2017 (15th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Romans 13: 1-7

I was joking with a few of you, last Sunday: joking at the irony of my having to preach—on the very Sunday that you will be pondering whether to extend my appointment by an extra two years...

...joking at the irony of my choosing this Sunday to preach on a text that really leaves me no choice but to speak about politics. And I suppose I could use this occasion to say some outrageous things that would cause this afternoon’s meeting to become more interesting than some of us are thinking it will be!

Mind you: the further irony in all of this, is that my needing to address, this morning, the first seven verses of the 13th chapter of Romans—and Paul’s insistence that we Christians should be *subject to the governing authorities*—the fact that I am having to deal with this passage at all, is very much a self-inflicted wound. Why is that? Well. Many months ago, when I was making plans for summer and fall, I knew that I would want to spend the summer with those parables from Matthew’s Gospel. I also knew I would want to do something a little bit special in October and early November, to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. That meant, however, that I would be left with six Sundays, spanning from late August to early October. Noticing that the lectionary we use—the three year cycle of readings I consult not as the law of the land but as a solid resource...noticing that the lectionary was working its way through Paul’s great letter to the Romans, I thought this would make for a good bridge to get us from those summer parables, to the anniversary of Martin Luther’s launching of the Reformation. And so, using the lectionary for inspiration, I divided chapters 12, 13, and 14 of Romans into six readings, put them in the schedule, passed the schedule along to Alison and to the Worship Committee, and put my feet contentedly up! What I failed to notice, however, when I divided up those three chapters of Romans, was that the lectionary itself completely bypasses Romans 13: 1-7. Not a word of it is included during this stretch...nor is it to be found on any of the other 155 Sundays that comprise the three-year cycle of readings. Banished! Banished to the outer darkness, that place—no doubt—where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth!

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To be fair: that doesn’t really come as a surprise. The churches which use our lectionary are mainly comprised of the mainline Protestant Churches. In addition, the lectionary we use is very close to the Roman Catholic Sunday lectionary, a lectionary that also omits Romans 13: 1-7. Like I say: that omission doesn’t come as a shock, partly because these are all denominations and churches that are aware of ways in which Romans 13: 1-7 has been misused in the past: providing the Church with a

pretext for placidly supporting governments that ought to have been challenged. These are also churches which, partly in reaction to that misuse, are very much focused on the work of social justice. In short, these are all churches that are not hesitant about challenging government power and authority. And so yes: Paul's rather un-qualified encouragement for Christians to accept the authority of those who have been placed in positions of authority, is hard to square with the life of churches that are prepared to question all authority, especially when it appears to have been placed in unworthy hands. Which leads to the obvious question:

How much authority should Romans 13: 1-7 hold for the contemporary church? Is it a text that we are better off omitting? Is it a text that has been so badly misused in the past, that it is simply irredeemable? Are those Biblical scholars correct who speculate that Paul didn't even write these words, that it was a later addition to Romans, a stance—to be honest—that has always struck me as wishful thinking! In short: was it a mistake for me to place this text before us? Would we have been better off venturing one week sooner to next Sunday's text...a text in which Paul speaks about love?

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Well. You all know the saying about fools rushing in...and I'm happy to be that sort of fool. Given the important role Romans has played in Christian history—especially the 500 year history of the Reformation Church—and given the fact that Romans has been used in questionable ways in the past, it seems to me, far from justifying passing it by in silence, that behoves us to grapple with it and figure out what kind of authority it still holds for us, or fails to hold for us. And frankly, my instincts tell me that those churches which are especially committed to the work of justice may be the very churches that most desperately need to hear Paul's perspective on these matters. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's first look at some of the challenges this text poses for us, starting with the very different context in which we live.

After all: Paul was writing at a time in which the Christian community was a community of outsiders. When he speaks of the need for Christians to be subject to the governing authorities, he is describing a situation in which none of the people to whom he writes would likely count themselves members of the governing authority. In short: he is providing counsel to what, at this point in time, is really a fringe religious sect, a sect that was trying to keep in the good books of governing authorities who would likely have already been suspicious of Christians because so many of them were Jews. Paul clearly sees no value in encouraging his co-religionists to provoke trouble; that would have been a sure path to deep difficulty for them, possibly the destruction of their faith-community. Besides! At the time Paul is believed to have written Romans—during the early years of the reign of the Emperor Nero, prior to his going a bit off the deep end and burning down the city of Rome!—things were relatively peaceful between the authorities and the Christian sect. In that context, Paul's advice makes good sense.

By way of contrast, we are part of a civilization that has been shaped, at least in part, by Christian convictions: although none of us should pretend that our society

always succeeds in embodying those convictions. Furthermore, many of the people who hold positions of authority within a nation such as Canada—even in these secular days—are still people who hold an allegiance to the Gospel and to the Church. Perhaps even more importantly, we—the people—play a role in choosing those who will hold authority over us: a facet of our place and time that could not be more different from the world in which Paul lived. It goes without saying that we will relate to those who hold authority in our society, differently than someone like Paul. In short: the fact that our context and Paul's are so very different is something that must be taken into account when we read a text such as the one we have encountered this morning. But, of course, there's more.

In addition to the difference between Paul's context and ours, attention must be paid to the fact that Romans 13: 1-7 hardly represents the only instance in which scripture tackles a political theme. On the contrary. In the Old Testament, we especially think of the prophets, who were not afraid to challenge the authority of Kings and others in authority. Indeed: when you read the story of how it came about that Israel had kings in the first place, it becomes abundantly clear that God was reluctant to give them a King. There is a deep libertarian strain in the Biblical literature: one that stands side by side with the social-justice strain in that literature. For while it may well have been Lord Acton who first coined the phrase—"power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely"—that caution most definitely does have Biblical roots. Indeed: if you are looking for a story that combines a deep social-justice theme with a strong libertarian theme, go no further than the story of the ancient Israelites making their escape from bondage. Moses was certainly no blind respecter of the Pharaoh's authority, when he undertook his role as liberator of his people. Nor are such obviously anti-authoritarian themes entirely missing from the New Testament. While it may be true that Jesus—like Paul—tells his disciples to pay their taxes...

...render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's...

...there is no denying the fact that other parts of the New Testament are far more suspicious of the secular authorities. William Stringfellow—an activist Christian lawyer whose name I mentioned a few Sunday's back—wrote a fascinating book in which he contrasted the 13th chapter of Romans (with its counsel to respect the governing authorities) with the 13th chapter of Revelation: a chapter in which we are shown the beast rising out of the sea, a beast that is clearly depicted in such a way as to leave no doubt but that the beast is Rome! Mind you: Revelation was written many years after Romans, by which point the Roman authorities were no longer as indifferent to the growth of the Christian movement as they had been during the early years under the Emperor Nero. Times change! Contexts change. The challenges we face as individuals...and the challenge the church faces as a corporate body...also change. But where in the world does that leave us, in relation to Romans 13: 1-7?

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Well: for starters. For starters, this is a text that must be used with caution. *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.* Surely it is the case that lived-experience teaches that any attempt at applying those words, must not shirk the responsibility of discerning “who” is wielding authority and “how” that authority if being wielded. For heaven’s sake: even within the Church, we Protestants know that full well. No Bishop is going to show up at this afternoon’s meeting to tell you what you need to do, in terms of any of the items that will appear on our agenda; our Church is structured in such a way so that authority is dispersed, is shared. If that’s true for us in how we govern the life of a small congregation, it’s certainly what we expect from those who shape the life of our cities, our Province and our Nation.

And no one, I dare to contend, has thought more deeply about these issues than the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, who was teaching in Germany when Hitler rose to power. Barth was a deeply scriptural theologian, who would not lightly discard any Biblical text. Moreover, even though he himself was not a Lutheran, he was well aware of the influence Romans 13 played in the Lutheran understanding of how the Church was supposed to relate to the State, which is to say that Barth was familiar with the fact that Luther saw Church and State as occupying two very different spheres. That’s one of the reasons there was so much reluctance, within the German Churches, to resist Hitler, once he was appointed Chancellor. But as Barth argued at the time: when Christians seek to live out their mandate to respect governing authority, they need not do so—and here he uses a memorable phrase—they need not do so as if they are living in a night, in which all cats are grey. We have not only the right, but the duty, to distinguish legitimate authority from illegitimate authority. Or, as Jewish Canadian theologian Emil Fackenheim put the matter...and I’m paraphrasing: *It’s all well and good to respect the governing authorities; but when the throne of Caesar is occupied by the anti-Christ, surely it’s time to change our response.* In short: any approach we take to Paul’s insistence that the governing authorities are to be obeyed must take context into account. But with that caution in place, is there any real value to what Paul is trying to teach us here....or might we be better advised to walk on by?

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To answer that question well...to answer it properly...it seems to me that we need to begin by honestly acknowledging that the Christian view of humanity—Christian anthropology if you please—paints a decidedly mixed portrait of the human race. On the one hand, we are almost god-like in the regard in which scripture holds us in terms of the creatures we were fashioned to be...and the beings we are destined to be in and through Christ. On the other hand, we are viewed as fallen creatures, who are vulnerable to an awful array of ugly tendencies and temptations not easily wished away. And the point I think is that while it is easy to discern conservative themes in our scripture (including Paul’s admonishment to obey the governing authorities), and while it is easy to discern social justice themes in our scripture (God bless the witness of the prophets) and while it is easy to discern a deep love of liberty in our scripture (there is a sense in which we are all the spiritual descendants of a rag-tag group of escaped

slaves), there really is nowhere in our Bibles in which the voice of anarchy is treated as a voice to which we ought to be listening. And yes: while it may be true that disasters such as Hurricane Irma can bring out the very best in human beings, anyone who saw the video images of looters running through the streets of southern Florida in the aftermath of that natural disaster, will be reminded of the impulse that can tempt any of us to do harm. In short, every human community requires some within that community to be offered the authority to maintain peace and good order; we forget that at our peril. Nor should we...

...nor should we—as a justice oriented denomination—forget that it is not only our bad impulses that need to be kept in check. History can serve as a painful reminder of how easily the best people—the best-intentioned people—those who seek to overthrow problematic authority in the hope of thereby ushering in a realm of greater justice, can discover that they only succeed in giving birth to an age of terror. Look no further than the French Revolution in the waning days of the 18th century, when the merciless justice of the guillotine replaced the problematic justice of the King. Look no further than the Russian Revolution in the early days of the 20th century, giving birth in short order to the nightmare of the Gulags. And thereby recall how much easier it is to overthrow a less than perfect regime, than it is to replace it with something more just: indeed, in some instances, to discover you have replaced it with something straight out of a horror film. In short: the more passionate you are about making the world a better place, perhaps the more seriously you ought to heed Paul's warning that dangers lurk when we seek too hastily to overturn those inevitably imperfect arrangements, through which the world is prevented from descending into chaos.

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Permit me a final thought.

I mentioned earlier...mentioned earlier the contrast between the picture of Roman authority that emerges in Paul's letter—in which the Roman authorities are depicted largely as a force for the good—and the portrait of those same authorities we find in the book Revelation, where they are shown to be an unqualified source of evil. And yet the irony...

...the irony is that Revelation is no more revolutionary in its approach than is Paul in Romans. Far from counselling his readers to rise-up, the writer of Revelation simply asks them to endure. And I want to be careful here: because it would simply be wrong for me to counsel resignation and passivity as if we live in a world that denies us the possibility of influencing the course of events. On the contrary: we live in a nation in which we have the privilege—not only at voting time but at countless other times—to speak up and make sure that our voices are heard. And yet...and yet.

No matter how you slice it, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that the New Testament as a whole—not only Paul but the New Testament as a whole—is far more passionate about trying to make the politics of the alternative community known as the

Church reflect the love of God, than it is with changing the politics of Rome. That's not something we political junkies are eager to hear: and yes, I'm as much a political junky as any of you; rarely does a day go by on which I don't spend at least an hour or two soaking up political news and commentary. And yet there are times...and perhaps we are moving into such a time...when the small acts of care and compassion we are able to exercise within and beyond our families, our faith communities, and our other circles of friendship and affiliation, will count for more than any of the big-ticket gestures we can offer within the politics of a world that seems increasingly unhinged. But, of course, that sort of care and compassion has less to do with obeying...or defying any of the rulers of this age: and more to do with learning to manifest the love that first loved us, in and through the one we call Jesus Christ. May we prove to be faithful to his love: this day and forever more.

Amen.