

“Ruling in Love”

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 13:1-10

“. . . For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” Romans 13:1

At the time Paul wrote this letter, Nero (perhaps most famous for his relentless persecution of Christians) publicized his Roman rule as the dawn of a golden age. Yet, privately, there were rumors that his mother had poisoned Claudius, her husband and uncle, to secure the throne for her son. While there were suspicions of assassination and conspiracy and a fearful use of power, Nero pictured himself early on as one who promoted peace. What the public heard about Nero is that he had hidden his sword but privately what they whispered about Nero revealed their darkest fears.¹

In our reading Paul encourages the Roman Christians to see God’s authority behind the power of the Rome. They were to respect Roman rulers not because they were powerful but because, in some strange way, they were servants of God. Imagine the difficulty this posed for these Roman Christians. Consider the difficulty it poses for us today. How do you relate to the civil authorities when publicly they say one thing and privately do another? How do you obey, as a Christian, when it seems like the rulers you are asked to obey are obscure the truth? Yes, the question is as relevant for Christians today as it was for Christians in Rome.

Consider the political landscape and the struggles of Christians. Some refuse to have anything to do with politics. “They’re all a bunch of crooks,” some Christians say. They withdraw from the political world, from the responsibilities that they have as citizens, because politics are corrupt and they don’t want anything to do with that world. Others want to use the political realm to create a Christian nation. Turning away from God’s gift of the church, where God gathers his people through the proclamation of the gospel, they turn to the nation, wanting the nation to take the place of the church, proclaiming the gospel from political offices and enforcing God’s word through the power of the sword.

The apostle Paul, however, offers another way. Paul knows of two kingdoms, two ways in which God is at work in the world. Earlier in the letter, Paul has recognized God’s gift of the church. The church is the means whereby God proclaims salvation, gathering for himself a people who share his message of salvation with the world. Now, Paul speaks of God’s gift of civil authority. One looks to such authorities not for a proclamation of the gospel but for an enactment of God’s good rule in the world.

Paul could have put forth propaganda. He could have argued for obedience to rulers because of their character, because they showed mercy, or because they had sheathed the sword, as we saw with Nero. But Paul anchors Christian obedience not on something as temporary and fleeting as the person in office or the laws of the empire. Paul anchors obedience on God. “Let every person be subject to the

¹ Adapted from sermon on Romans 13:1-10 by Dr. David Schmitt in sermon series titled, “God’s Greater Story.”

governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (v. 1). Paul turns the eyes of the early Christians from the realm of Rome to the realm of God. They are to see that the present authorities are masks of God, offices that God has established in his rule of the world. Though Nero’s propaganda encouraged people to think he had sheathed his sword, Paul claims that God has given one to him and that he does not bear it in vain (v. 4). Whether he believes or does not believe, he is a “servant of God” (v. 4), placed in authority.

Some who hold these offices test God’s people, driving them deeper and deeper into the experience of faith, so that Christians believe in the midst of persecution and confess the faith in the midst of a world of contempt. Others offer a public witness, honoring God by their words and seeking to serve him as best they can through their actions. Our relationship to these authorities, however, is not based on their person but on God’s work. Within their offices, we see the power of God, establishing order for all people in the world. They have been given the power to restrain evil and promote good. Sometimes they use it wisely. Other times not. But that does not diminish their office, the fact that God has established the civil authorities not to save people but to care for them.

Paul’s words encourage Christians to see how God can work through civil authorities, rewarding good, restraining evil, forming a society of peace where his people can gather and the word can be proclaimed. Honor is not given blindly. Christians follow rulers not on the basis of political propaganda or dreams of establishing an earthly kingdom for God. No, we recognize that God has established his kingdom in Jesus Christ.

We may doubt that God is in control of our nation and our world because we do not agree with the governing rulers and authorities and politicians. We may doubt that God is in control because we think that these politicians and rulers are not obeying God’s Word and Will. We may be tempted to take matters into our own hands through civil disobedience or violent protests. Instead, let us take it all to the foot of the cross. Why? That is where God has proved that he is ultimately in control in this world. That is where your God has broken into this world and worked through the governmental systems and political systems of 1st century Rome and Palestine to ultimately forgive every doubt or temptations or other sin that you commit against your God either directly or indirectly as it is aimed at the very rulers and authorities he has put in place as a way of demonstrating his control and provision and governance over your life and mine. There, on the cross, the full might and consequence that a government could throw at an innocent man that chose willingly to take, there, your God takes your doubts, your temptations, your Sin and pours out mercy and love.

Through the gospel, God has called you into that kingdom and, though this world and Satan himself should fight against it, that kingdom will never be taken away. When you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, this Jesus is with you. Through him, you live. In him, you die. And, by him, you will be raised to eternal life.

As you walk through the streets of this world, however, we are also aware of another working of God. God has established offices and uses them to create civil order and foster the public good. Power is recognized. Obedience is given. Not blindly. Not stupidly. But faithfully, as we seek to do good, to avoid evil, and to honor these rulers as “ministers of God” (v. 6).

The God who rules his church also rules over all. Therefore, as Christians, we trust in God's mercy for our salvation and we live in faithful obedience to civil authorities, knowing that they have been instituted by God. Amen.