

“Law & Order”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
July 30, 2018**

Old Testament lesson: 2 Chronicles 20:5-9

New Testament lesson: Romans 13:1-5

In Geneva, Switzerland, there are four unique sites that each point, in a different way, to power and authority. Geneva is home to one of the world’s largest United Nations headquarters (second only to the New York City offices). The UN is the seat of global power and authority. Its made up of 193 countries committed to confronting humanity’s common challenges and managing shared responsibility for global peace and prosperity. The UN represents governmental power.

Another famous tourist attraction in Geneva is the Reformation Wall. It memorializes the religious thinkers and church leaders who gave rise to the protestant reformation, which gave rise to the Presbyterian Church (USA), which gave rise to First Presbyterian Church of Independence, MO. The Reformation Wall represents religious power, as compared to governmental power at the UN.

Also in Geneva is the Jet d’Eau (which is French for “Water Jet”). Situated just offshore in Lake Geneva, the jet shoots out 130 gallons of water per second, reaching a height of 460 feet. It’s quite a sight, visible from anywhere and everywhere in the city. The Geneva Water Jet represents civic power, the power of a community to band together for greatness.

The fourth major tourist attraction in Geneva is St. Pierre Cathedral, where John Calvin preached. All churches and cathedrals are symbols of God’s presence in our world and our dependence upon God. Compared to the other three types of power and authority – governmental, religious, and civic – church buildings and cathedrals are uniquely representative of God’s divine, heavenly power and authority.

Interestingly, the Apostle Paul represents all four of types of power. Paul, who wrote the Letter to the Churches in Rome that we heard read from this morning – Paul first and foremost, was a citizen of Rome. He owed a certain allegiance to the Roman government and its power and authority.

As he grew to manhood, Paul became a Pharisee charged with interpreting and enforcing religious law, religious power and authority. He was also a civic leader in his community, since all of Jewish society centered around the synagogue and its civic power and authority.

It was only later in life that Paul became an apostle of Jesus. The risen Lord selected Paul and sent him to the Gentiles – those people who were not part of Jewish society – to lead them to faith in God, power and authority through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And here, Paul is writing to those same people, telling them how true Christians should relate to earthly power and authority. Think about it. These are Roman citizens, and immigrants from far-off lands, and Jews living in Rome. They’ve all seen the light of Christ and now they need help dealing with the realities of their day – living under a corrupt, cruel, overbearing, and heartless government.

It doesn’t matter whether you are on the right or the left when it comes to political and social issues today; we can all relate to life under an ineffective government that is run by corrupt and/or incompetent officials.

The question isn't who's right and who's wrong among Democrats and Republicans. The question is how do we live as faithful followers of Christ in a world where there's enough blame to go around, and then some. And seemingly little we can do about it, to make a difference.

Of course, in this country that's not true. We can make a difference. We can vote. We have a primary election on August 7 and midterm elections on November 6. We have a responsibility to vote prayerfully and after searching our conscience for how God would have us vote. That's what one lady did when approached in a local bar by a politician running for reelection. The reelection candidate paid for the woman's drink. She thanked him but wondered why a stranger had bought her a beer. "I'm running for mayor," he told her, "and I want your vote." "You got it," she said. "Anyone's better than the jerk who's in there now." Did I mention he was running for reelection?

Making a difference. This concern about making a difference is exactly what Paul was addressing in his letter to the churches in Rome. Paul knew all-too-well about the corrupt, hard-hearted brutality of the Roman government. And yet, he writes to the faithful saying, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." "Do you wish to have no fear of the authority?" asks Paul. "Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it (the governing authority) is God's servant for your good." Government as God's servant for our good – now there's a concept.

It's hard to imagine any national government these days being seen as the servant of God for the good of God's people. But that's what Paul says, and he says this about the Roman government – one of the most brutal governments in history. Even so, Paul has a very high vision and standard for earthly rulers. He says, "... Rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad." Do we believe that? Do we believe that the rulers of nations today are dedicated to promoting good conduct and striking down bad? I don't think so. Oh, some are, I suppose. But too many seem to be unconcerned with right and wrong as long as it gets them reelected, fills their bank accounts, and increases their power.

Why would Paul tell the faithful of ancient Rome – and us to be subject to such wicked, misguided governmental officials?

There's only one answer. God. As concerned as Paul was about the abuses of Rome, Paul was that much more sure of God's power and authority. "... There is no authority except from God," says Paul, "and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God." In other words, we are subject to governmental authorities, and governmental authorities are subject to God.

In the grand scheme of things, God values law and order over and against the chaos and anarchy that arises without it. We -and our elected officials- are expected to work through the proper channels of governmental authority for the good of God's people and all creation. This clearly places God above all earthly authorities and it places all governments under the will and power of God. Access to true power and authority comes only through seeking and obeying the will of God. Anyone acting in opposition to God – even an elected official or national ruler – is subject to God's judgment. Or as Paul puts it, "Whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment."

This idea of divine judgment dovetails with what Paul writes just one passage earlier. In Romans 12, verse 14 and following, Paul says, "Bless those who persecute you.... Do not repay anyone evil for evil.... Never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God.... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." That is our access to true power and authority – overcoming evil with good. If we do our best to adhere to the teachings of Jesus Christ, maintain faith in God, and look to the day when evil, misguided ways are overcome once and for all, then all our concerns fall away.

We don't have to worry about the abuse of power by incompetent "leaders," over the long run. God will raise up true leaders – humble, faithful men and women of good and Godly conscience.

And in the meantime, in the short run-like today! - we are called to work within the system to change what needs changed, or if needed, to change the system, by peaceable appealing to those true leaders whom God is raising up for God's sake, in accordance with God's will. Let us pray:

PRAYER AFTER SERMON:

Lord, last week we wrote down the name of one person who you are calling us to impact with the Good News of Jesus Christ as it is lived out in our lives, spoken as invitation from our lips, raised up in care and concern from our hearts. Those names are on the communion table today as an offering of our love of the Gospel and as a testament to our courageous faith that only you can activate in our lives. Today, we add to that our commitment to affirm and promote the Gospel through our role as citizens of this country. May we be instruments of the change and transformation needed to bring into reality your vision, O God, of a New Heaven and a New Earth. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

We look to you, O God, to grant us peace, and empower us to be an instrument of your peace. And yet, we find ourselves wondering what peace even look like anymore?

It feels so foreign, so often completely absent from the world we live in.

You assure us that Jesus, our Savior, is our peace. He is the one who brings calm and quiet and rest. Give us tangible moments of deep peace. Help us to believe that it is possible to experience peace even in the midst of chaos.

We pray your peace – and healing – for all those we continue to lift up in prayer. We pray your strength for their care-givers.

And for us, O Lord, may we always spread to each person we meet the truth of Christ and the peace that he brought.

We pray this in Jesus name, praying the prayer that he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**