

Sermon for The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: November 15, 2020

Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

Old Testament:

Epistle Reading: Romans 13:1-10

Gospel Reading:

Sermon Text:

Sermon Title: We Live in Mercy and Faithful Obedience



Introit: Psalm 143:2, 5–6, 10–11; antiphon: v. 1

Hymns:

LSB 902 – Lord Jesus Christ be Present Now

LSB 966 – Before You, Lord, We Bow

LSB 579 – The Law of God is Good and Wise

LSB 433 – Glory Be to Jesus

Songs:

Holy is the Lord

Way Maker

This is the Air I Breathe

Glory Be to Jesus

Liturgy:

Divine Service I, p. 151

Liturgy:

Creative Worship



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Text: Romans 13:1–10

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

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Grace to you, and peace, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Introduction:

“All roads lead to Rome.¹” I’m sure you’ve heard this expression. Rome was the center of a massive web of roads covering the Roman Empire. Roads were marked with milestones, these roads spread outward from a single monument erected by Caesar Augustus: the golden milestone, placed by the temple of the Roman god Saturn. On that monument, Augustus had listed the major cities of the empire and the distances to them. So standing at that monument, one could see the extent of the Roman Empire.

Roman roads stretched outward. They went up to the Wall of Britain. They ran “alongside the Rhine, the Danube, and the Euphrates.”² These roads were a symbol of Roman power and Roman presence. The powerful military of the empire could be sent to any district. Standing on a Roman road, one knew the Roman Empire’s reach, and its vast military might.

In the picture we see One who stands, along the Appian Way, looking off into the distance. There is nothing about His features that would cause you to notice Him. He looks like any other young Roman man. Clean-shaven, wearing a toga, carrying a bucket of water, and holding a lamb around His neck. Yet, standing along the Appian Way, this man draws our attention not to the ways of Rome, and its military power, but to the ways of God, His mercy and power.

This one figure is the ‘monument,’ if you will, raised up by God for all peoples. Through Him, one receives God’s mercy and, in Him, one responds to the powers of this world. As we consider Paul’s letter to the Romans this morning, we will look at it through the eyes of this image, seeing God’s action of mercy in Jesus, and considering how He teaches us to respond to the powers that run and rule in this world.

I. God’s Mercy in Jesus:

This figure of a young Roman shepherd is one of the earliest pieces of Christian art. It stands along the Appian Way, but not above ground. This figure is under ground, an image painted on the walls of the catacombs of St. Callixtus, a complex of tombs that reaches downward four levels and outward 12 miles. When above ground, this figure would call to mind the life of Rome, but when under ground, where the earliest Christians buried their dead, and sometimes hid in worship, he offers us a different vision.

1 Jean de la Fontaine, “The Arbiter, the Hospitaler, and the Hermit” in *The Complete Fables of La Fontaine*, trans. Norman R. Shapiro (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007) : 397.

2 Edwin Guest, *Origines Celticae* Vol. 2 (London: Macmillan and Co., 1883): 102.

This figure was painted years after Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome. Things had gotten worse, not better over that span of time. The military power of Rome had turned against the Christians with vengeance. They were killed in persecution and slaughtered in sport. Yet as some things in Rome became darker for the Christians, other things became clearer. These early Christians, suffering persecution, began painting figures on the walls of their graves. Clear visions of God's mercy and power. In the darkness of the catacombs, they painted with the light of salvation.

Here, in the tombs, the early Christians buried their martyrs who were killed and cast away by the powers of the world. On the walls of these tombs, the early Christians painted their Savior, confessing the wonderful power of God. A power that saw and claimed the persecuted, the killed, the powerless and the rejected. This one Roman figure, with a lamb across His shoulders, is the great Shepherd of the sheep. This is how the early Roman Christians retold the parable of the lost sheep in the Gospel lesson we read.

Jesus sees their suffering and He comes here to find them, to bind up their wounds, and gather them together and give them the promise of life everlasting. Taking them on His shoulders, He will raise them up and bring them to a new creation and joy that never ends. Here, in this labyrinth of death, the early Christians confessed Jesus to be the way, the truth, and the life. He is the One who has come to save God's people and He calls all people to follow Him.

When you look closely at this image, you notice something interesting. It does not attempt to offer a realistic picture of Jesus. You can't recognize Jesus here. He is not a bearded Palestinian. He has no halo around His head. No wounds in His hands or side. What the earliest Christians understood was, the way you recognize Jesus is not by what He looks like but by what He does. He claims His people in everlasting love, and has promised to return and bring His people into a new creation. In the sight of the world, Jesus may not look like a ruler, but in the darkness of death, He reveals His power, His promise of life everlasting, and of a kingdom that will never end. The same message remains true for us today.

Look around you. Crowds are not following Jesus, rulers are not bending their knees before Him. Yet He remains the Savior of the world. Though our world rejects Him as the promised Messiah, though religious scholars question His words and the accounts of His resurrection, though academics claim His followers are blind, brainwashed foolish, still the true Jesus comes for you.

Through His death and resurrection, He opens the way to eternal life. He brings you into His kingdom. Buried with Him in Holy Baptism, he raises you to new life,

and, until that day when He returns, He will lead you like a shepherd through the pathways of this world. How do you walk in the way of this kingdom? How do you relate and react to the civil powers of this world?

II. God's Rule through Civil Authorities:

Consider what happened when these early Christians left the darkness of the catacombs and went out into the world. Imagine how difficult it must have been to believe in Jesus and live in Rome. You come out of the catacombs and into the light. For miles and miles, you are surrounded by the roads of the Roman Empire. You live in at the very center of its power and might. How do you live in this empire as a Christian? How could you live in this world knowing that you were a citizen of another? That is the question Paul attempts to answer. He reveals God's greater plan for you as you not only live by His mercy but also honor His power.

Paul learned this way from Jesus in a blinding vision on a Damascus Road. Now, in this letter, Paul shares this wisdom to the earliest Christians in the heart of the empire. Paul offers words that reveal how God rules over all things. Whether you are walking along the roads of Rome or the streets of Austin, MN, you live as a child of God. You respect God's authority, His power to rule over the world, and you rejoice in His mercy, as you share His acts of love with His world.

Paul encourages the Roman Christians to see God's authority behind the power of Rome. They were to respect Roman rulers not because they were powerful but because, in some strange way, they were servants of God and their authority, regardless of how sinfully they might wield it, was given to them by God for His purposes to benefit those who love Him.

At the time Paul writes this letter, Nero publicly proclaimed his rule as the dawn of a golden age. Privately there were rumors that his mother had poisoned Claudius, her husband and uncle, to secure the throne for her son. Nero himself joked about the poisoning saying that Claudius became a god by eating a mushroom.³ A poison one. Why use a sword when a mushroom can work just as well? While there were suspicions of assassination, conspiracy and a fearful use of power, Nero pictured himself early on as one who promised peace.

When Seneca, a philosopher of the time, offered an essay to Nero on mercy, he celebrated the fact that Nero had sheathed the sword.⁴ Prophecies proclaimed his reign was the dawn of the golden age. In one poem, a child comes in from working in the fields and stands before a sword hanging in his father's house and marvels at

3 Miriam Tamara Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (London: Routledge, 1984), 96.

4 Lucius Annasus Seneca, "On Mercy" in *Moral Essays Vol. 1* (London: W. Heinemann, 1928), 357-359.

it. He does not need to carry a sword nor use one since this is a time of peace.⁵ What the public heard about Nero is that he had hidden his sword, but privately what they whispered about Nero revealed their darkest fears.

Imagine the challenge for those Christians there. How do you relate to such abusive and cruel authorities when publicly they say one thing and privately do another? How do you follow rulers, as a Christian, when it seems like the rulers are propagating so much by propaganda so you never can really know the truth? The question was as relevant then as it is for Christians today.

Look at the culture in which we live, and the struggles of Christians. Some refuse to have anything to do with politics, saying, “They’re all a bunch of crooks.” They withdraw from the political world, from the responsibilities that they have as citizens, because they view politics are corrupt and they don’t want anything to do with it. Others want to use the political machine 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, wanting the proclamation of the Gospel from political offices and enforcing God’s Word through the power of the sword.

The apostle Paul offers another way. Paul understands there are two kingdoms, two ways in which God is at work in the world. Earlier in the letter Paul recognized God’s gift of the Church. The Church is the means through which 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 proclaiming the Gospel but as those whom God has put in place to rule the world, for His purpose, and for the good of those who love Him.⁶

Paul could have argued for obedience to rulers because of their character, because they showed mercy, or because they had sheathed the sword. Instead Paul anchors Christian adherence to secular authority not on something as temporary and fleeting as the person in office or the laws of the empire. Paul anchors obedience on something as powerful and eternal as God.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.
For there is no authority except from God, and those that
exist have been instituted by God.⁷

5 Neil Elliot, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 155-156.

6 Romans 8:28

7 Romans 13:1

Paul turns the eyes of the early Christians from the realm of Rome to the realm of God. They are to see the present authorities as 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. Whether he believes or does not believe, he is a servant of God, placed in authority by God.⁸

Some who hold these offices test God's people, driving them deeper and deeper into reliance on faith. Christians can always offer a public witness, honoring God by their words and seeking to serve Him as best they can through their actions under all circumstance. Our relationship to these authorities, however, is not based on their character, 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 that power wisely, other times they may abuse it and use it for evil, but that does not diminish their office. God has established civil authorities, not to save people but, to care for them.

Conclusion:

Paul's words encourage Christians to see how God can work through civil authorities, rewarding good, restraining evil, and forming a society of peace where His people can gather and the Word can be proclaimed. Honor is not given blindly. Respect is not paid blindly. Christians follow rulers not on the basis of political propaganda, or dreams of establishing an earthly kingdom for God. We recognize that God has established His kingdom in Jesus Christ. Through the Gospel God has called you into that kingdom. Though this world and Satan himself should fight against it, this kingdom will never be taken away.⁹ When you walk through the valley of the shadow of death Jesus is with you. He is with you like He is in this picture. His is with you like the Good Shepherd. Through Him you live. In Him you die. By Him, you will rise to eternal life.

The God who rules His Church in mercy rules over all. As Christians we trust in God's mercy for our salvation, and we live in faithful obedience to civil authorities, knowing that those offices have been established by God.

Amen.

8 Romans 13:4
9 Matthew 16:18

**Proclaim God's Word,
Encourage one another in faith,
Witness to God's love and
Serve all people**

