

November 16, 2014 "Faith Shapes Perspective" Romans 13:1-7

This morning I am doing something they told us never to do in preaching class. The passage I read to you from Romans 13 talks about those who are the government. In fact it counsels us to submit to government. It counsels us to recognize that God has established the government, in all its manifestations on a given day. This portion became the basis of the doctrine, the political doctrine of the divine right of kings. It directs us to recognize that the only thing we have to fear from the existing government is punishment if we are doing wrong....breaking the law.

My message is not about government. My message is rather about the attitude that gave rise to the letter to the Romans. My message is about the attitude that gave rise to the early church, with such vigour, that the church has continued to exist. It may come as a surprise but there are those even in the church, even working for the church who expect village churches like ours to eventually disappear. There are those who think the measure of a church is its ability to prove itself financially viable...paying its bills, paying its minister, contributing to the denominational programmes and staff, at the rate levied according to a mathematical formula by the finance department of the denomination at 50 Wynford Drive.

One of the beautiful things about Romans, and Romans 13, along with all the rest of the documents that make up the New Testament is that they predate the era of recognizable denominations of the church. They predate the office of paid and professional clergy. They predate church buildings, recognizable by the architecture, steeples, and stained glass windows. When this document was written, the church was a group of people meeting in someone's house or the open air to worship God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit with the primary goal of worship being to experience the presence of the living God and encourage fellow believers. It was a simpler time. A time to which we cannot return and for a host of health and safety reasons should not want to do so.

But having said that we who live in much more complex times and who wrestle with the challenges of the viability of the church, are tempted to ask, how did they do what they did? They reached people of their time with the message Jesus Christ saves people from their sin through faith. They did it and succeeded in doing it, in spite of governmental opposition. They succeeded in spite of the fact that it became a crime to be a Christian. In fact the more the church was persecuted, the more effective the authorities became at killing Christians, the more effective became the spread of the gospel. Here is the question I have wrestled with for more than two thirds of my 50 years in ministry: Why does the church grow? What sustains Christians in those times of Paul and in our times as well?

I am convinced the answer is not terribly complex. It's not complicated. For one thing the early Christians had no time and no facilities in which to hold a prolonged retreat to develop a master plan. And I am utterly convinced the answer lies in this passage of Romans 13, as well as a multitude of other Biblical texts. It starts with the explanation of government in verses 1 of the chapter. "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established."

You see, what is profound about that insight is this. Those early Christians like Paul had formerly been Jewish. The Jews never conformed to what the Roman Empire wanted them to be. They never accepted the legitimacy of the Roman conquest. In fact their lack of submission led directly to rebellion on the part of the Jews, the destruction of the Temple and much of Jerusalem, and the disappearance of 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel.

With all of his Jewish background, Paul calls Christians to submit to the Roman authority. He urges submission to the power of the Roman military. Submission to the Roman Empire as a governmental system. He is not interested in rebellion. He does not pursue the creation of a Christian state or even a Christian province. And the reason he calls for submission is his faith that God is truly in charge. That the Romans are only able to do what they do, accomplish what they accomplish, because God has permitted them to do so. He believes, it is a matter of faith for Paul that those who have the authority to rule, receive that authority from the very God who has redeemed Paul from his sins in Jesus Christ.

I recently read the monthly column in The Presbyterian Record by the current Moderator, Dr. Stephen Farris. He shared that in his travels for the church as Moderator, he gets asked by folk from other denominations, if he is saved. He has developed a stock answer I found engaging. He says yes in response. That inevitably leads to his being asked, when? How long has he been a Christian. He is not looking for a doctrinal duel. His answer is that he was saved on a hill outside Jerusalem by Jesus Christ somewhere around the year 33 AD. You know what is profound about that answer? Like Paul in Romans 13, he is saying God did it...a long time ago. He prophesies his faith in Jesus Christ crucified and risen. Period. He is saying its not about me...it is about God.

I have a feeling deep down in my heart and soul that is really the perspective we need to develop in this present age. Its not about us, and it is not about the church as an institution. It is about God, and the fact that God is really God. Period.

What I see as I read through this chapter of Paul's letter is that his faith in Jesus has really shaped his perspective on everything. He does not call for submission to the government because he is a wimp, or has no convictions of his own. Rather he has a perspective that every detail of the unfolding world around him is unfolding according to the grace of God. He accepts what he cannot change. He works in the world in which he finds himself. He works with the time at his disposal. He works to the end that everyone who can hear his voice learns about Jesus, the love of God, eternal life, the easy accessible new life that can be had by faith. That there is no one beyond the pale of God's redemptive purposes.

How that works out in practical ways is simple to see. First of all he frankly does not get entangled in the things of this world that do not further his chosen cause. He is not a politician. He does not tilt at windmills, by which I mean he does not fight battles he probably cannot win. If a crowd gathers he gets their attention and he preaches. God has given the opportunity! If for reasons over which he has had no control he gets beaten up, arrested, thrown in prison...what does he do? He prays. He praises God. He keeps his eye on the ball and waits for God to open the next door. If it happens to

be a jailor about to commit suicide, he reminds the jailor all prisoners are in place. And then he tells the man about Jesus the Saviour. If they chain him to a soldier so that he cannot escape, he praises God and tells the soldier about Jesus. After all, if he cannot escape the chains, neither can the soldier. God has given a unique opportunity. Let your faith shape your perspective.

Let us pray;

Heavenly Father, sometimes we overthink the things we say. Remind us often that you are the God who does wonderful things, who loves us beyond our comprehension, who is not only present but in charge in every circumstance. Help us to see that we can serve you in words and in the manner of our living. Help us be clear evidence of the faith you have given us. In Jesus name we pray. Amen