

**PENTECOST 8B – July 15<sup>th</sup> 2018**

***The Leadership Principle***

**(Amos 7:7-15; Mark 6:14-29)**

Back in mid-June, Attorney General Jeff Sessions – who is a Methodist, I believe – caused a bit of a stir when he defended the administration’s policy of separating immigrant children from their families along our southern border by referring to some verses from scripture. If you recall, what he said at the time was this:

*I would cite to you the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order.*

Later, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the daughter of a Baptist minister, then echoed those very same sentiments when she herself offered the following: “It is very biblical to enforce the law” she said.

Now here’s what they were referring to; the first two verses of Romans 13, which read as follows: “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. Therefore,” writes Paul, “whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed...”

To be sure, this is not the only place in scripture where Christians are counseled to obey governmental authority. For example, in 1 Peter 2:13 we hear: “For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors...”

The only problem, of course, is that those in government are not always right, are they? Not everything they do is fair. Not every decision they make is just. Not every position they take is good.

The latest Gallup poll, for instance, reveals that only 19% of Americans actually approve of the job that Congress is doing at this point. In other words, slightly less than one-in-five people. While Congress's *disapproval* rating currently stands at a whopping 76%! Or, to look at it another way, slightly more than three-fourths of all Americans think that Congress is doing a lousy job!

I'm reminded of a story. A busload of politicians were once driving down a country road when, all of a sudden, the bus ran off the road and crashed into a tree in an old farmer's field. The old farmer, after seeing what happened, went over to investigate. He then proceeded to dig a hole and bury the politicians.

A few days later, the local sheriff heard what had happened and came out to investigate for himself. He saw the wreckage from the bus crash. Then he asked the old farmer where all the politicians had gone. The old farmer said he had buried them.

The sheriff then said to the old farmer, "But the coroner wasn't here. Are you sure they were all dead?" And the old farmer paused, slowly scratched his chin, and then replied, "Well, come to think of it, some of them *said* they weren't." He quickly added, however, "But you know how them politicians lie."

Well, our readings from Amos and the Gospel of Mark this morning *also* have something to say about our responsibilities to the governing

authorities, as well as our obligation to obey the law. And, interestingly enough, they seemingly offer a far *different* conclusion, a far different perspective than Romans 13 does...

Now Amos was called to prophesy somewhere in the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. at a time when the northern kingdom of Israel had come to rely more on its military might than on its faith in God; a time when there were grave injustices in society; when the wealthy were enriching themselves at the expense of the poor; and when there was widespread immorality and shallow, meaningless piety. (Kind of sounds like some things never change, doesn't it?) Nevertheless, in a manner of speaking, Israel had, in effect, "crossed the line."

And that's exactly what God says to Amos, "See, I am setting a *plumb line* in the midst of my people." A plumb line is a rather simple but accurate tool, used since ancient times, for determining whether or not something is perfectly straight and upright. It consists of a line of cord to which some kind of weight is then attached. At first a stone was used, but later it was a weight made from lead. (The *word* plumb, in fact, actually comes from the Latin word for "lead," which is also where we get the word *plumber*, who originally was someone who *worked* with lead – including lead pipes.)

Anyway, when allowed to hang down, the weight, drawn by the force of gravity, will determine if something is perfectly vertical. Jesus, as a carpenter, for instance, would have owned a set of weights to be used in this manner in the building trade. However, in this reading from Amos, of course, the expression is being used here to refer to how righteously or *upright* (which is what righteous means)... how righteously God's people are standing and behaving.

God then adds, “I will never again pass them by...” This was an obvious reference to how previously God “passed over” the people of Israel during their escape from Egypt. It seems as if God is now saying, “I am no longer going to give them (quote, unquote) a *free pass*.” In other words, God is now going to hold them accountable for their actions.

Finally, Amos – once again speaking on God’s behalf (which is what prophets do, of course) – indicates that God will now pass *through* them – as opposed to pass *over* them – wreaking havoc and leaving desolation and waste in his path...

As you can imagine, this does not go over very well. Amos was not one to sugarcoat his words or hold anything back. And so this leads to a confrontation with Amaziah, the high priest of Bethel, who then also goes and immediately informs the king, Jeroboam, of what Amos is saying and predicting. In fact, in a verse *not* included in today’s reading, verse 16, Amaziah even goes so far as to demand that Amos *stop* his preaching.

Which leads us then to the obvious question: To whom are we ultimately accountable? In this case, to the king? Or to God?

Romans 13, remember, appeared to argue that we are to be subject to the governing authorities simply because they have received their authority directly from God. But *here*, Amos seems to be saying that *God* is the ultimate authority in our lives, even *over* and *above* the individuals and institutions that may exercise authority on God’s behalf.

Then we come to this morning's gospel... As Delmer Chilton has observed, "Figuring out what led up to the events in today's gospel lesson is (a little) like trying to follow the story line of a soap opera. It can get a little confusing."

It's also helpful to realize that today's gospel reading represents a "flashback" of sorts as well. A flashback, of course, is a scene in a movie or novel that takes place at an earlier time. In this instance, that earlier time or event was the death of John the Baptist. You see, after preaching a call for repentance out there in the wilderness, and then baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River, John kind of fell out of the picture, didn't he? The focus, at that point, then turned to Jesus and *his* ministry.

But now, just as Jesus' ministry is picking up some steam, and his name is becoming known (as we are told this morning), people were apparently saying that "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead."

Huh? Say what? Mark sort of skipped right over that rather important little detail, didn't he? Hence, the flashback that is today's reading.

So here's the deal. King Herod – not the King Herod who was around when Jesus was born, but his son – was, by all accounts, a pretty lousy human being and also a pretty lousy ruler as well. For one thing, he had married his brother's wife. This, of course, wouldn't have been so bad, except that his brother was still living at the time, and Herod had forced him to divorce his wife Herodias so *he* could marry her instead. Moreover, the daughter whose dancing so pleased Herod that he foolishly promised to grant her any wish, was then actually his niece, and *she* then ended up marrying his brother, her uncle. Or as Delmer

Chilton, again, has observed, “Sounds (sort of) like a bad redneck joke, doesn’t it?”

Well, into the midst of this ancient soap opera comes John the Baptist who takes a look at this whole sordid mess and calls Herod on it. He pointed out Herod’s failures and flaws, both as a leader and also as a human being.

As a result, Herodias, the wife, naturally wants John dead. So when her husband foolishly promises to grant her daughter any wish, she tells her daughter to ask for the Baptist’s head on a platter.

Herod, apparently, was conflicted – “deeply grieved” says our reading. On the one hand, he had something of a soft spot for John, even despite John’s harsh criticisms. On the other hand, as the old saying goes: “Happy wife, happy life.” And maybe just as importantly, Herod was a vain, but obviously insecure man, who couldn’t go back on his word, on that promise to his daughter... err, I mean his niece. Whatever!

So John is beheaded, and we have here a rather stark reminder of the risks of speaking the truth to power. And of resisting those who are in authority. Moreover, this incident in Mark’s story also foreshadows what awaits Jesus himself as well, doesn’t it? After all, it was the Roman *authorities*, specifically Pontius Pilate, who ordered his crucifixion.

But the issue here is, once again, one of obedience to authority. Or, as I suggested earlier: To whom are we ultimately accountable?

John the Baptist, of course, spoke the truth – a rather harsh truth – to someone in authority. And he then paid for it with his life.

So where does that leave *us*? Are we bound, as Romans 13 certainly seems to suggest, to always obey the law and those in authority without question or exception?

*Or...* are we bound, as our readings from Amos and Mark this morning would seem to indicate, to an even *higher* authority? In other words, are there exceptions to what Romans 13 seems to be saying?

A more recent example from history may be helpful here.

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was elected chancellor of Germany. As Eric Metaxas has written, Hitler's "political opponents thought that (he) needed *them* and naively thought that they could therefore control him." Hitler, however, knew that his opponents "were divided and couldn't unite against him. He would play them off each other brilliantly and would consolidate his power with breathtaking speed and a calculating ruthlessness for which no one was prepared."

Then, in short order, "The Fuhrer Principle" as it came to be known (Fuhrer being the German word for "Leader") soon dominated. It was a very simple concept really. Rudolf Hess, at one time Hitler's second-in-command, perhaps summed it up best when he said in a public speech, "Hitler *is* Germany and Germany is Hitler. Whatever he does is necessary. Whatever he does is successful. Clearly the Fuhrer has divine blessing."

Now you could see how, *logically* at least, this conclusion could be drawn. Romans 13, again, stated "...those authorities that exist have been instituted *by God*." Pretty cut and dried, wouldn't you say? And for many in Germany, at the time, that's exactly how they viewed it as they followed Hitler blindly even as he ordered the deaths of 6 million Jews and plunged the entire world into chaos and a devastating global war.

However, just two days after Hitler's election, a young 26-year-old Lutheran pastor and theologian by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer sounded the alarm when he gave a radio address (that was mysteriously cut off before its conclusion, by the way) in which he critiqued this very concept of leadership:

"The individual is responsible before God (he said)... The fearful danger of the present time is that above the cry for authority, be it of a Leader or of an office, we forget that man stands alone before the *ultimate* authority and that anyone who lays violent hands on man here is infringing eternal laws and taking upon himself superhuman authority which will eventually crush him... Leaders or offices which set themselves up as gods *mock* God... and must perish."

Bonhoeffer then went on to personally resist Hitler and the Nazi regime, even becoming involved in an unsuccessful plot to assassinate the German dictator. And twelve years later, just like John the Baptist before him, Bonhoeffer paid with his life for speaking the truth to power; in his case an utterly corrupt and depraved power that was Nazi Germany. On April 9, 1945, just weeks before the end of the Second World War, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed at the Flossenbug concentration camp.



So, again, I ask the question: To whom are we ultimately accountable?

Bonhoeffer was unequivocal in his *own* response, wasn't he? *God* is the ultimate authority in this life and in this world, he said. And, therefore, it is to *God* that we are ultimately accountable...

Which brings us back to Romans 13, and what Attorney General Jeff Sessions said a few weeks ago to justify the administration's immigration policy, particularly as it pertained to the separation of children, even infant children, from their parents. "I would cite to you the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order," he said.

It's too bad that, apparently, Attorney General Sessions didn't keep reading a little bit further in Romans 13, where Paul qualifies his earlier remarks, and offers an even deeper commitment. For, if he *had*, he would have come across *these* words:

"Owe no one anything except to *love* one another; for the one who loves another has *fulfilled* the law," writes Paul. "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, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

Therefore, I simply ask you to think about this for a moment: Is the forced separation of children, especially infant children, from their parents *ever* a loving act? Under *any* circumstances? Regardless of what you may personally think about illegal immigration. We can

certainly debate about that and take different positions. But that's not the issue here. The issue here is what constitutes love for the neighbor.

...The entire law, says Paul, is summed up by the words, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Why? Because love *does no wrong* to a neighbor. Ever! Period.

Nazi Germany, as we heard, had this monstrous notion they called "The Fuhrer Principle," or "The Leader Principle," which made the leader the ultimate authority in their country and in their society. And, therefore, anything he said, or ordered, had to be obeyed without exception...

As Christians, however, we have a far *different* leadership principle, don't we? As Christians, we believe that God – especially as he has revealed himself to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – is the ultimate authority in *our* lives; the *only* one to whom we are ultimately accountable.

And the law of love, especially as it has been demonstrated for us in Christ, then supersedes and outranks every other law that any society would ever choose to adopt. The kind of love that does no wrong to a neighbor; *whoever* that neighbor might be. It doesn't matter.

For *love* is the one and only guiding force for good in our world, and the only law, therefore, that we are bound to obey without exception.

Amen.

