

Thinking Together About Romans 13, Scripture, Immigration, Love and the Law

“With many such parables,” we just heard from the Gospel of Mark (4:26-34), “he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them *except* in parables, but he explained everything in *private* to his disciples.” Jesus was a storyteller. That was his main thing. Parables are those stories Jesus used all the time to make a point. The word *parable* literally means to “throw something alongside” of something else. This week something has been thrown alongside of us. I am not one to preach political sermons. Especially in our current climate of extreme polarization. I will not endorse a political candidate from the pulpit. But I *am* a steward of the Scriptures in this community. I have a concern about the stewardship of Scripture that I can’t in good conscience *not* address.

And today is Father’s Day, the day when fathers want more than anything else to be with their children. But there are many fathers and mothers trying to make a better life for their families, who are separated from their children today because of the way our government is choosing to enforce immigration laws at the borders of our country. What I cannot *not* address is that this week a text from *Scripture* was the centerpiece of a news cycle. The text was taken out of its overall Biblical context and used to support this practice of separating children from their parents. The very things our Lord Jesus teaches in all these parables and the very principles to which our Scriptures bear witness were misrepresented by the attorney general of the United States and used to justify this practice. As Jesus explained everything in private to his disciples, think of my comments this morning as me explaining in private to you the challenge I believe this presents to the church.

The attorney general was speaking in Fort Wayne IN on Thursday. He addressed this remark to those whom he called “our church friends” – religious leaders who had criticized the practice of breaking up families. He invoked Romans chapter 13 verse 1 which he paraphrased, “I would cite you to 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.” The White House Press Secretary followed up at a press conference: “It is very biblical to enforce the law.”

I am curious about something. If you heard this story on Thursday or Friday, where did your thinking go? I’m wondering how many of you went to your Bibles and turned to Romans chapter 13 to check it out. If so, did you read what comes before? And especially after?

In the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) of the Bible, which is what we use in worship, Romans 13 verse 1 reads “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God....” This verse never shows up on Sunday morning. And its troubling history may be the reason it was never chosen to be in the ecumenical Revised Common Lectionary. Americans and biblical scholars have vigorously debated this passage since the Revolution.

Biblical scholars Margaret Aymer and Laura Nasrallah make the point that the passage was misused last Thursday. I believe their thinking on this is worth hearing. First, they say, the Bible shouldn’t – and can’t – be used to argue against immigration. Passages from Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy and the prophets argue for care for the stranger and the immigrant: “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 19:33-34 NRSV).

“We can turn to the New Testament, as well,” they say. “Jesus’ words, as cited in the *parable* of the Good Samaritan, call Christians to ask, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29) These words demand that we expand our definition of neighbor – as did the Samaritan – to include the stranger and the foreigner, and that we serve that neighbor with our own time and financial resources.”

Second, they remind us that during the time of the American Revolution, “Christians knew that the passage might be read to demand loyalty to Britain. So instead they read this passage to argue that they should obey only just rulers, not tyrants, and that just rulers supported liberty. They used it to argue that the Bible spoke for freedom.”

Third, they say, “using this passage from Romans is dangerous. It has been used to argue *for* theocracy and unquestioned obedience to law even in the face of oppression. In 1850, Romans 13:1 was used to undergird the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. This required U.S. citizens to return individuals who had escaped from slavery to their owners.” [It was the law.] Historian Lincoln Mullen notes that debates invoking Biblical support for slavery “fractured the Bible’s authority in the public sphere....” We have not recovered. “The most radical of abolitionists came to believe that the Bible did justify slavery and rejected the Bible on precisely those grounds.”

“Finally,” Aymer and Nasrallah say, “if we *do* take Romans 13 as a keystone for action, then we have to put the small portion [the attorney general] quotes within a larger context. The apostle Paul also argues in the same passage that all commandments are summed up in the teaching ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ (Romans 13:9). Paul continues, pointedly, ‘Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law’ (Romans 13:10). Paul here echoes the law (Leviticus 19:18) [of the Old Testament] and teachings of Jesus (Matthew 22:19). [That love is the fulfillment of the law] is a central message of the scriptures.”

“If we’re committed to using the Bible to argue about immigration,” they say, “let us not start by taking Romans [13:1] out of context. Instead, let’s listen to the overwhelming witness of scripture on behalf of the foreigners in our midst. Let’s start with love.”

Last week in one of the Discovery Process workshops you were putting forth your strengths. You listed “The Three Legged Stool” of the Episcopal Church: scripture, tradition and reason. The Episcopal Church balances the authority of Scripture with tradition and reason. That also means you do not take single verses out of context and apply them universally when it suits your purposes. You use Scripture to interpret Scripture.

What happened Thursday in this country may have been another nail in the coffin for the church. Or was it? The silver lining is that more of us were reading and talking about the Bible than ever. What does the Bible *really* say? How is your church equipping you to be a voice of reason, love, humility and calm at the water cooler when these issues come up in conversation? Do you know how – and where – to *find* Romans in the Bible?

I’d like to suggest a family activity for Father’s Day. Take out your Bibles and read Romans chapter 12 and chapter 13. In their entirety. That’s seven paragraphs total. Or just chapter 13. That’s only three paragraphs. And then have a family conversation. Listen to one another. You never know what might get thrown alongside of you.

Pastor Dana Runestad

June 17, 2019

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 6) ~ Father’s Day

Sources:

Rev. Dr. Margaret Aymer and Laura Nasrallah, “What Jeff Sessions Got Wrong When Quoting the Bible” published by *The Washington Post* online in “Acts of Faith” (Perspective). https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/06/15/what-jeff-sessions-got-wrong-when-quoting-the-bible/?utm_term=.e8b0aad7ef6a

Mary Hinkle Shore, “Commentary on Romans 13:8-14,” https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1061

Lincoln Mullen, “The Fight to Define Romans 13,” <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/06/romans-13/562916/>