

Open Wide Your Hearts

Last week, the Bible was thrust center stage in our national political discourse by Attorney General Jeff Sessions. The Attorney General quoted Romans 13:1-7 to assert that our government and its laws are instituted by God, and that challenging and opposing them is nothing less than challenging and opposing God himself. Specifically, he was defending the “zero tolerance” border crackdown that was separating children from their parents and placing the children in detention facilities...in *tender age shelters*. We’ve seen the pictures. We’ve read the statistics. We’ve heard the recordings of the children crying. Last Wednesday, President Trump changed the policy of separating immigrant children from their families. But that change did not reunite the 2,300 currently detained children with their families...nor did it limit how long these families will be detained...nor did it mitigate the terror and heal the emotional devastation that these families and children have experienced.

The Attorney General appealed to the Bible – the church’s sacred text – to sanctify state policy. So the church needs to pay very close attention, because the Bible is the church’s book, not the state’s. And this isn’t the first time in our nation’s history that the state has hidden behind Romans 13 to legitimize political policies...policies as inhumane and violent as slavery, segregation, and the systematic diminishment of this land’s first people, the American Indians. If the church and I deflect this crisis with empty platitudes, we sacrifice our faith on the altar of fear, and we abandon God’s children for the hollow safety of our own silence. So this morning, I am going to speak to it head-on. Here goes!

Jeff Sessions is a member of the United Methodist Church. In response to his appropriation of Romans 13 for political purposes, 640 United Methodist clergy and lay members from across the United States brought church charges against him for violating Paragraph 270.3 of the United Methodist Church's *Book of Discipline*...the denomination’s constitution. Under that church law, he has been charged with child abuse, immorality, racial discrimination and “dissemination of doctrines contrary to the standards of doctrine of the United Methodist Church.”

So just exactly what does Romans 13:1-7 say? Listen:

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 whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

No scriptural text can be properly understood apart from its context. The particular context of *this* text is Rome...it's the capital city and epicenter of the Roman Empire...and it's the tyrannical reign of Emperor Nero. For the sake of the survival of the church, and for his own survival, Paul needed to *sound* like he was supportive of the Empire. But, when we read between the lines, it is clear that he was not! Listen: *...there is no authority except from God.*

The official religion of the Roman Empire was emperor worship. In fact, the oath of loyalty to the Empire was simply this: *Caesar is Lord.* The central confession of faith of the early church was *Jesus is Lord:* not a very subtle act of defiance against Caesar and his empire. Where Paul writes that *...there is no authority except from God,* he is referring to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...not the God of the Roman Empire...not Caesar! **Since Rome insisted that Caesar was god, what Paul is really saying is that Caesar has no divine authority for those whose Lord is Jesus Christ!**

Then there's this: *Pay to all what is due them...* Here, Paul echoes almost word-for-word what Jesus said to the Pharisees when they tried to set a trap for Him:

Jesus, tell us what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Aware of their malice, Jesus said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

This is what Jesus and Paul are saying: *If a coin has the Emperor's image on it, then the Emperor is due it. But you and I are not made in the image of the Emperor! We are made in the image of God.* That means that we belong to God, not to the state...just as the children who are being detained in *tender age shelters* belong to God.

Attorney General Sessions appealed to Romans 13. But that's not the only scripture we need to hear. From the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

And, most poignantly, hold on to these words of Jesus from the gospel of Mark:

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

The only way that Jesus ever related to children was to open His heart to them and enfold them in His loving arms. And He won't settle for anything less from us! Following Jesus means opening *our* hearts and offering Jesus' embrace with *our* arms to all the children of the world.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul says this very plainly: *I speak to you as children...* Paul isn't putting the Corinthians down and saying that they are inferior! He's lifting them up as precious and pleading with them to grow into maturity in the religion of the heart...into the full commitment of an open-hearted faith: *Children, there is no restriction in our affections, only in yours. Our hearts are open wide to you; open wide your hearts also.*

Jeff and Gail are my age. Jeanie and I met them when they started visiting Union Church in Green Bay. Then we got to know them well as they became devoted members of that church. We've drifted away from Jeff and Gail since we moved to Glenview, so when we received an invitation a few weeks ago to their 40th Wedding Anniversary weekend later this summer, we were thrilled! Here's what I'll never forget about Gail and Jeff.

In 2001, Union Church committed to sponsoring a Somali refugee family through the Roman Catholic Diocese of Green Bay. The family we were assigned included a dad, a mom, four small children, and a teenage daughter named Sadia. Something didn't add up about Sadia. There was no affection between her and her parents. After several months we learned that that was because the two adults in that family weren't Sadia's mom and dad! Instead, they told Sadia – they told that orphaned girl – that they would bring her with them to the United States if she would be their nanny for free. After a year or so, some of that family's relatives were resettled in Minneapolis. One night, the mom and dad packed up their four children and slipped away to the Twin Cities. When Sadia woke up the next morning, she knew that she had been abandoned. On Sunday morning, the chair of Union Church's Refugee Sponsorship Committee stood up and told Sadia's story. She concluded with this: *Sadia needs to finish high school. She needs a home. She needs a family.* The postlude had hardly begun when Gail and Jeff snagged the chair of that committee and told her that they would take Sadia. From the very first day she was in their home, Jeff and Gail made Sadia their own. She became their daughter in every way. Gail and Jeff's other daughters – Vanessa and Emily – were thrilled to have a new sister. And Sadia has given Jeff and Gail four grandchildren. When the Apostle Paul invites us to open wide our hearts, the faces I see belong to Gail and Jeff.

In Ephesians, Paul tells us clearly that the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness are afraid of open hearts. Indeed, they do everything in their power to shrivel our hearts and lock them up in fear and hate. It is not just heartless to victimize children in the present darkness of our political struggle. It is evil.

But God has given us something much more powerful than the fear and hate that are the tools of rulers, authorities and cosmic powers. In the words of the Apostle Paul, God has given us *...the strength of the Lord*. It is in the Lord's strength that we stand up and are counted. And, for this witness, we are well equipped! God has given us more divine gifts than we will ever need: *truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the word of God*. These are the tools of open hearts...open hearts that never quit trusting and believing that there is no power in all of creation that can withstand the power of love.

Now, some may say that that is unrealistic and hopelessly naïve. Some may say that I have a bleeding heart. But I believe that there is nothing more real, and mighty, and filled with hope than the strength and the salvation of Jesus Christ my Lord. In the words of my friend William Sloane Coffin: *I'd rather have a bleeding heart than a heart of stone!*

Fellow disciples, the storms of life are raging around us today. They may not have touched us personally yet. But they will. This is not a crisis only for people who are different from us. This is not a crisis only for people who live in a place far, far away. This is a human crisis. As a pastor in Nazi Germany, Martin Niemöller wrote this:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

We might add:

Then they came for the immigrants and took their children and I did not speak out—

Because I was not an immigrant and children have no voice.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

When we are silent about the suffering and abuse of others, no one will speak for us. We are one humanity. We are all in this boat together. So standing up and speaking out with open hearts is our only option as Christians.

And no matter how fierce the storm, we can do that because Jesus is with us in our boat, just as he was with His disciples in their boat so long ago. And Jesus isn't just with us in our storm-tossed boat; He's sleeping! Jesus trusts God so much, and His open heart is so full of love, that all of His fear and anxiety have been wiped away.

Romans 13 made the news last week. But we only heard part of it! Here's what the Apostle Paul goes on to say:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. All of the commandments...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.

Dear friends, Jesus is love in human flesh. So let us take our lead from Him! Even in the ferocity of the storm, focus on the Savior! Can you see Him? He's right here! And He's so confident and so certain about the power of God's love that He's sleeping like a baby!

Jesus' heart is open wide. And isn't that what our faith is all about: not ***heartless laws*** that wound and destroy our sisters and brothers, but ***hearts that are open wide to the law of love?***

Yes, ***Open wide your hearts! Amen!***

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Glenview Community Church
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II Corinthians 6:1-134
Mark 4:35-41