

John Sampson  
“The Place of Theology”  
Text: Romans 13:1 - 10  
Preached at KVCC  
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Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

Today we start a sermon series that I am calling Extraordinary Time, which is a play on the name of the liturgical season we're in – Ordinary Time. In this sermon series we'll reflect on how our lives are made extraordinary, not easy and not without issues and challenges, but none-the-less extraordinary by the presence of God's spirit moving through our world.

This sermon series will be based on topics you chose a couple of weeks ago. Overall I received a little over 50 suggestions, which covered a wide range of concerns. But two issues rose to top. First, many people were interested in exploring the topic of forgiveness – for oneself, for others, in the face of the unforgivable – and we’ll look at that over the course of the summer.

The other topic that many of us wanted to consider during our weekly worship is the challenges that face our nation today – political and social. And so we kick off our season of Extraordinary Time by considering a national tragedy unfolding right in front of us, and that has exploded all over the news in the past couple of weeks.

But I start by going back in time a couple of years.

When I was in seminary James Cone, the father of Black Liberation Theology, was my professor for Systematic Theology. And he said

many things that have stuck with me, but one of them is, I think, especially apropos for where we find ourselves today, as a nation, and as a people, and as persons of faith.

He said that theology – the process of our human reflection on the experience we call God – starts when we read the scriptures of our tradition, and compare them to our lived experience, and realize they don't match. We realize that our scriptures are telling us something that doesn't mesh with what is happening in our families and our communities. Theology starts at the place where two worlds collide. It starts at a border...a border just like our southern border with Mexico.

Over the past weeks we have all seen the heart wrenching results of the implementation of our nation's new zero tolerance policy applied to immigrants crossing our southern border illegally. We've seen how families have been ripped apart, how children have been

put in cages, and surveiled by armed guards. We've seen how those who are coming to our wealthy and prosperous nation in the hopes of escaping war, gang violence, rape, and all the other horrible crimes occurring in their nations have been demonized and vilified and criminalized.

We witness this reality unfolding right before our eyes and it collides with the image many of us have of our nation. And it also collides with how we think about ourselves as people of faith, and followers of Jesus' message of love.

Hearing the tapes of children sobbing for their parents who had been forcibly taken from them, we have been told that such actions are not just legal, they are right and good. And that any dissension about these tactics and policies is not biblical.

I am not sure if you had the same experience I had when I heard this. I was watching the news and there was a member of our government who defended the zero tolerance policy that was breaking families apart as being biblical. Now I always confess that I haven't read the whole Bible cover to cover, but I did a quick scan in my mind and couldn't think of a passage that I had actually read that seemed to support our government's actions.

It was a couple of days later that I finally saw the video of Attorney General Sessions saying that not only were our nation's newly enforced immigration policies good, but that to question them, to argue against them, to resist them, went against the teachings of the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul's letter to the followers of Jesus in Rome.

Now I've read Romans, and I wasn't surprised when I reread it after AG Sessions' remarks that I had forgotten the verses he quotes. Because it's a hard passage. It seems to promote the idea that we

should simply and unreflectively support our government in its policies and laws because their power and authority, according to Paul, is sourced from God.

But as I saw the picture of a young boy surrounded by troops with pistols taking him from his parents I knew, in my body, and in my heart that what I was witnessing was wrong. No matter what the Paul said, no matter what Sessions said, no matter what Huckabee Sanders said...I knew this was wrong. And maybe you did too.

Two worlds come into conflict and this is where theology is born. This is where we need to do some hard thinking, and some hard praying.

At the border where our scriptures come into contact with families being broken apart – this is where we wrestle with none other than

God herself, and our beliefs about who or what she is, and how her spirit moves through our lives.

So I went back to Romans 13. And I've been reading it every day, and I've been watching the news every day. And I've been speaking with many of you and others every day. And I've been struggling within myself every day to reconcile this passage from Paul and the blasphemy that is unfolding on our border.

And even though I haven't fully resolved the conflict I'm experiencing I want to share with you one single insight that has helped me to make some sense of the collision of my two worlds – my citizenship in the United States, and my citizenship in God's realm.

I think there has been a great confusion in the way Paul's letter to the Romans has been read, and how it's been used to support what's

going on at our southern border, and how it's been leveraged to quell any dissent against our government's actions.

When Paul wrote his letter he lived in a time and a place where political power and authority ultimately resided in one person – the Roman emperor. Every organ of the state, every branch of government, every military division ultimately supported and served the emperor, who in Paul's time was Nero. And what's more, all of the Roman emperors since Augustus had claimed that they were actually divine. They were gods living on earth, and when they died they believed they would return to heaven, return to their place in the pantheon of all of the other Roman gods and goddesses. The emperor's proclamations were absolute because they were represented as the will of heaven.

When Paul writes about God speaking through the ruler, or rulers, it's inline with the political theology of his day, and of his experience.



He never lived in a society where the people had a say in politics, or elected governmental officials, or knew of a rule of law that checked the power of the emperor. In Paul's time Nero was the law.

But this is NOT the world we live in.

We as a nation do not believe that God speaks through our president.

We do not believe that our government is the expression of the divine right of a ruling person or group.

Many people died over the course of our history to reject these ideas, and give us all freedom.

For us, here today, we believe that ultimate authority rests not in the government, but in the people.

“We, the people...,” that is how our constitution opens, not I the President, not I the Attorney General, not I the White House Communications Director.

To confuse the political reality of imperial Rome, with the 21<sup>st</sup> century American democracy is a gross misstep to say the least.

And to believe that we must accept all that Paul offers us from his society is untenable. Think about it. Paul accepts the fact of slavery. We have rejected it, and it's right that we have. Paul accepts that women should not speak in worship. We reject that premise, and it's just that we do. As modern Christians we believe that we are tasked with accepting the spirit of Paul's message, while releasing the 1<sup>st</sup> century social norms that are intertwined with it.

And this goes for how we think about political authority. Where Paul understood a divine connection to the rulers, and their absolute power, our society has rejected these ideas for centuries. And we're not going back in time.

For us here today, political power resides with the people. With you and with me.

And so now let's reread the opening of Romans 13 from our perspective as Americans, from our perspective as people who believe that we have the authority in our nation. Because when we do, it completely overturns the claims by members of our government that we should simply shut up, sit down, and get with the program of tearing families apart at our border because it is good and right.

Hear these words. Hear this good news:

Let every person be subject to the governing [authority of the people]; for there is no authority [of the people] except from God, and [the authority of the people] that [exists has] been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists [the] authority [of the people] resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. For [the ruling people] are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority [of the people]? 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 [of the people] does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.

By embracing our American belief that government is for the people, and from the people, and by the people Romans 13 is no longer a cudgel to beat down our right and proper questioning of the events

occurring on our border. It can actually be seen as a warning to our leaders that they must act properly and ethically in all they do, and that the people will hold them accountable.

Do you [members of the government] wish to have no fear of the authority [of the people]? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval;

Isn't this rewritten passage the truth? Isn't it from fear of the authority of the people that an Executive Order was signed this past week discontinuing the separation of families at our borders? Aren't our voices not a terror to good conduct, but to bad, and isn't that how it should be?

So raise your voices.

Let them speak out of your hearts and your bodies, which know so deeply and intimately what is right and what is wrong about what is going on at our borders, and across our nation.

Do not be silenced. Do not silence yourself.

Speak and act.

Over these next weeks and months it will be important for all of us to share our thoughts and feelings about the social and humanitarian fallout from what is happening at our borders. It will be important for us to show up, and to work together towards repairing the divided families, and our divided nation.

But through it all God reminds us that our voices and our actions must speak with words of love – to our neighbors, to those in our community who have different opinions from us, to those who serve

us in our government, to the families divided at our borders. We are commanded to speak words that bring us together, that have compassion for one another, that overcome our divisions and our isolation. Our words and our actions should always create the possibility of union not disintegration – even when it is hard and difficult. Our words should speak about love, the greatest of all God’s commandments to her children, and they should be spoken in love.

This is the responsibility of speaking as people of faith, in hard times, in extraordinary times, and at the border.

Amen.