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Pentecost XV & Proper 18
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Text: Romans 13:1 – 10
Title: Living in Mercy & Faithful Obedience

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. “All roads lead to Rome.” You might have heard that saying before. It comes from a French fable from the seventeenth century. The city was literally the center of a massive set of roadways. Marked with milestones, the roads spread outward from a single monument erected by Ceasar Augustus. On that monument, Augustus had listed the major cities of the empire and the distances to them. So, standing at the monument in Rome, you could see the extent of the Roman Empire, and the Roman roads stretched outward from that point. They spoke of the power of Rome. Standing on a Roman road, you knew the Roman Empire’s reach and its power.

But four levels beneath those roads that show Roman power, you will find the catacombs of St. Callixtus and the tombs of the early Christians stretching out for about 12 miles. Years after St. Paul wrote his letter to the Roman Christians things had gotten worse, not better. The power of Rome had turned against them, and they suffered persecution and were killed for sport. But as some things in Rome became darker for Christians, other things became clearer. These early Christians began painting figures on the walls of their graves. Clear visions of God’s mercy and power. In the darkness of the catacombs, they painted with the light of salvation. One of those figures is a young shepherd, with a lamb around his shoulders, reminding the early faithful of the Good Shepherd who shows us His mercy and power. The painting reminds us of God’s mercy in Jesus as He teaches us how to respond to the powers of this world.

There, in the tombs, the early Christians buried their martyrs, killed and cast off by the powers of the world. On the walls of those tombs, the early Christians painted their Savior,

confessing the wonderful power of God. A power that saw and claimed the persecuted, the killed, the powerless, and the rejected. This one figure, with a lamb across His shoulders, is how the early Roman Christians retold the parable of today's Gospel reading.

Jesus sees their suffering and He comes here to find them, to bind up their wounds, and gather them together and give them the promise of life everlasting. He takes them on His shoulders, raises them up, and brings them to a New Creation with joy that never ends. In this maze of death, the early Christians confessed Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is the One who has come to save God's people, and He calls all people to follow Him. He claims His people in everlasting love and has promised to return and bring His people into a New Creation. In the light of this world, Jesus may not look like a ruler but, in the darkness of death, He reveals His power. His promise is life everlasting and a world without end, and the same is true today.

Look around you. Crowds are not typically following Jesus. Rulers are not bending their knees before Him. But He remains the Savior of the world. Our world rejects Him as the Messiah. So-called religious scholars question His sayings and His resurrection. Many claim that His followers are blind, foolish, even stupid, but Jesus still comes for you. Through His death and resurrection, He opens the way of eternal life. He brings you into His kingdom. Buried with Him in baptism, He raises you to New Life, and He will lead you like a shepherd through this world until He returns. But we have to ask, how do we walk in the ways of His Kingdom, and how do we relate to the civil powers of this world?

Imagine how difficult it must have been to believe in Jesus and live in Rome under persecution. You come out of the catacombs and into the sunlight, and you are surrounded by the roads of the Roman Empire reminding you of its power. How do you live in this empire as a Christian? How could you live in one world knowing that you were a citizen of another? That is

the question Paul attempts to answer in today's text as he reveals God's great plan for you to live by His mercy, His honor, and His power.

Paul learned God's way from Jesus on the Road to Damascus, and he shares this wisdom with the Christians in the heart of the empire. St. Paul offers words that reveal how God rules over all things. Whether you are walking along the roads of Rome or the streets of Marshfield, you live as a child of God. You respect God's authority, His power over the world, and you rejoice in His mercy, as you share His acts of love in His world. St. Paul encourages the Roman Christians to see God's authority behind the power of Rome. They were to respect Roman rulers not because they were powerful, but because they were, ultimately, servants of God.

At the time Paul wrote this letter, Nero ruled. He publicized his reign as the dawn of a golden age. But privately, there were rumors that his mother had poisoned Claudius, her husband and uncle, to secure the throne for her son. Nero himself joked about it. While there were suspicions of assassination and conspiracy and a fearful use of power, Nero pictured himself early on as one who promoted peace. Roman prophecies said that his reign was the dawn of the golden age. What the public heard about Nero is that he had hidden his sword, but privately what they whispered about Nero revealed their darkest fears.

Imagine the difficulty this posed for Christians. How do you relate to the civil authorities when publicly they say one thing and privately do another? As a Christian, how do you obey when the rulers are obscured by propaganda and rumors so you never know the truth? The question is as relevant for Christians today as it was for Christians back then in Rome.

Look at our political landscape and the struggles of Christians. Some refuse to have anything to do with politics. "They're all a bunch of crooks," some Christians say. So they withdraw from the political world and the responsibilities they have as citizens, because politics

are corrupt and they don't want anything to do with that world. Others want to use the political realm to create a Christian nation. Turning away from God's gift of the church, where God gathers His people through the proclamation of the Gospel. They instead turn to the government, wanting the nation to take the place of the church, proclaiming a gospel from political offices and enforcing God's word through the power of the sword.

But St. Paul offers a different way. Paul knows of two kingdoms, two ways in which God is at work in the world. Earlier in the letter, Paul has recognized God's gift of the church. The church is the place where God proclaims salvation, gathering for Himself a people who share His message of salvation with the world. Now, Paul speaks of God's gift of civil authority. One looks to such authorities not for a proclamation of the Gospel but for an enactment of God's good order and rule in the world.

Paul could have written like any other propaganda writer. He could have argued for obedience to rulers for any number of worldly reasons, from their character to their power. But Paul anchors Christian obedience not on something as temporary and fleeting as the person in office or the laws of the land. No, he anchors obedience on God. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God." Paul turns the eyes of the early Christians from the realm of Rome to the realm of God. They are to see that the governing authorities are masks of God, established in His rule of the world. Paul knows that God has given the government the sword for a reason. Whether the rulers believe or do not believe, they are a "servant of God," placed in authority.

Some rulers test God's people, driving them deeper and deeper into faith, so that persecuted Christians believe and confess the faith even in a world of contempt. Other rulers offer a public witness, honoring God by their words and seeking to serve Him as best they can

through their actions. Our relationship to these authorities, however, is not based on their person but on God's work. Within their offices, we see the power of God, establishing order for all people in the world. They have been given the power to restrain evil and promote good. Sometimes they use it wisely and faithfully. Other times not so much. But that doesn't diminish their office. The fact is that God has established the civil authorities to care for people.

Paul's words encourage Christians to see how God can work through civil authorities, rewarding good, restraining evil, keeping peace where His people can gather and the Word can be proclaimed. Honor and respect are not given blindly. Christians follow rulers not on the basis of political propaganda or dreams of establishing an earthly kingdom for God.

No, we recognize that God has established His true Kingdom in Jesus Christ. Through the Gospel, God has called you into that Kingdom and, though this world and Satan himself fight against it, His Kingdom will never be taken away. When you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Jesus is with you. Like that early Christian picture of Jesus the Good Shepherd. Through Him, you live. In Him, you die. And, by Him, you'll be raised to eternal life.

As you walk through the streets of this world, however, we are also aware of another working of God. God has established offices and uses them to create civil order and foster the public good. Power is recognized. Obedience is given. Not blindly. Not stupidly. But faithfully, as we seek to do good, to avoid evil, and to honor these rulers as "ministers of God." The God who rules His church in mercy also rules over all. Therefore, as Christians, we trust in God's mercy for our salvation, and we live in faithful obedience to civil authorities, knowing that they have been instituted by God for the good of all people. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.