

Two Thirteens

Romans 13:1-5; Revelation 13:1, 6-10; Acts 4:18-20

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, (July 1) 2023

Kyle Childress

This Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, which also happens to be the Sunday of the July 4th holiday, we are here to worship God. And not just any God but the God who has been revealed to us through Jesus. So, we are here to also talk about Jesus. That's what we're supposed to always do. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that when the church stops talking about Jesus, it has nothing to say, so says Sam Wells, the Vicar of St. Martin in the Fields in London. He went on, And when the church assumes dominance, power, control, it's not talking about Jesus (see *The Christian Century*, July 22, 2015).

Three or four years ago, I was preparing to speak before the Nacogdoches City Commission in favor of the City creating an Office of Diversity that would look over the shoulder of the City, including the Police Dept. and help train the City in paying attention to such things as racism. This was in the aftermath of arrest of the Black SFA student Lindsey Ogbonna, you might remember, who was at an apartment complex swimming pool after a party.

One of the speakers against creating the Diversity Office, got up and read the entire chapter of Romans 13 and then added their interpretation that Romans 13 says the government is doing God's will and our job is to simply obey, no matter what. Furthermore, God's law and the law of the State are one and the same.

At a Right-Wing rally in town about that same time, a speaker said, "There is no such thing as racism. There is only obedience or disobedience to the State."

I was hearing arguments from across the centuries from governing authorities trying to convince people that their law and the law of God were the same.

These speakers were purported to be Christian But as Bonhoeffer said above, when we start talking dominance, we have ceased talking about Jesus.

The response of God's people to the State across the centuries has been that we obey the God no matter what the government says. Going back at least as far as the slave midwives Shiphrah and Puah in Exodus 1, who disobeyed the law of Pharaoh and refused to kill newborn Hebrew baby boys because as the Bible says, "The midwives feared God" (Ex. 1:17).

When you hear people say, "God has ordained the government for his purposes," I remind us that means the government is for God's purposes. It does not mean that whatever the government says is law is God's purposes. Very often the two – God's purposes and the State's policy and law – are counter to each other. For example, seventy years ago it was the law of much of the land that people who were black could be discriminated against. It was the law. But God's people, mostly black churches stood up and said "No! We follow a higher law; the law of God and we refuse to cooperate with your laws. And they went to jail for it, and many were tortured, and some died for it.

Governments as far back as Constantine, the emperor of Rome in 313 CE, have referred to Romans 13 for divine sanction and godly authority. And as far back as Constantine, they've been wrong.

Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant Reformed and Lutheran traditions have long been big on theories of how God uses the state and how we are

to obey the state. Anabaptists and baptists, and other churches coming out of the radical reformation and peace church traditions have been a bit more careful, discerning, and even skeptical about granting too much of God's authority to the government – any government. After the experience of Hitler, most churches of every kind reassessed their teachings on the role of government. Though, as we know all too well, there are many today who are loudly invigorated by the notion that because their White Christian Nationalism values are gaining power, therefore, it must be God's will. (See your handout from the Baptist Joint Committee "What is Christian Nationalism?")

Very quickly, here are some summary statements for us to remember:

- (1) In Romans 13 to say that God "orders" or institutes ruling authorities simply means that God wants orderly government. God wants a kind of society in which, as a simple example, we know which side of the road to drive on and in which the law says we are to stop at red lights. But beyond that God wants a kind of order where it is easier to do good rather than bad, where it is easier to love your neighbor. Think about that for a moment. It seems that we increasingly have an order that makes it easier to do bad than to do good, and where hating our neighbor seems to be the law of the land. According to Romans 13, that calls into question any divine authority of the present government.

- (2) When Paul says let every person be subject to the governing authorities, or as another translation puts it, let every person submit, Paul is NOT saying that we are to obey the rulers in all things. To submit means to that our first calling as Christians is to follow Jesus Christ and if that is not against the rulers, then that's fine. Sometimes we're even involved

with the ruling authorities by voting, running for office, etc. But other times it might mean breaking the law of the rulers, then so be it. We submit by going to jail. For most of us, going to jail for our faith and practice has never been a part of our lives or even in our minds. Non-violent civil disobedience is not a theoretical or abstract concept anymore. Paul reminds us in verse 9 and 10 that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves and love does no wrong to a neighbor. But when we witness our neighbors harassed, arrested, thrown in jail, deported, and on and on, then we must speak out.

No matter our context, we are to find ways, often creative ways, to speak the truth of Jesus to the State. The most common way we speak is we vote. But there are times we stand before the governing authorities and we quote Scripture, oftentimes we quote the State's own founding documents like the Constitution, sometimes we simply speak commonsense, and sometimes we protest, organize, and even go to jail for nonviolent civil disobedience. But we speak.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the State, but rather the conscience of the State. It must be the guide and the critic of the State, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority."

(3) The New Testament talks in many ways about the State or the ruling authorities, Romans 13 is just one of them. For example, in both Matthew and Luke are temptation stories of Jesus in the wilderness being

confronted by Satan. Satan says that if Jesus will bow down to him then Satan will give to Jesus all the kingdoms and governments of the world. Jesus turns the offer down, but Jesus does not argue with Satan that the kingdoms and governments of the world belong to Satan or at least, Satan seems to be running them.

Another big example is part of our reading this morning: Revelation 13, in which the ruling authorities are shown to be predatory beasts that make war against the people of God. In history, those groups who benefit from the rulers always like to quote Romans 13, but those groups who have been hunted down, thrown in prison, and burned at the stake have tended to see government through the perspective of Revelation 13. Our radical baptist tradition has tended to see both Romans 13 and Revelation 13 operating all the time. Revelation 13 is not simply about some future date; it was true in the past, it is true now, and it will be true in the future. Our calling is to discern how it is true and discern how we are to respond as Jesus followers.

Discernment is the essential. We are to discern the difference between the ruling powers of Revelation 13 and Romans 13, because it is not simply a matter of choosing between two clearly delineated options. Romans 13 and Revelation 13 tend to overlap. We live in them. We live in the midst of the tension and even chaos at the juncture of where the two collide. In the confusion and cacophony, we listen for God. In that in-between place, we have to discern God's work.

Often, we discern that the governing authorities are sliding toward Revelation 13 and the predatory beasts in being unjust and mistreating

people and using violence. Part of our response is to speak out and call the governing authorities back to a Romans 13 and God's purposes of loving our neighbors as ourselves.

In our reading from Acts 4 this morning, Peter and John have been hanging out with the beggars on the front steps of the Temple (notice who their companions are). And they are arrested for healing one of the beggars and turning around and attributing that healing to the living and resurrected Jesus Christ, whom the ruling authorities had executed just a few months before. Peter and John are hauled into court by these same ruling authorities and told to shut up or else. They respond, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge. But we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20).

Peter and John testify what they have seen and heard in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They discern the truth that the love of God and the love of neighbor embodied in the living and resurrected Jesus Christ is what's real. And they're going to keep on talking and preaching and practicing what they see and hear. The ruling authorities must make their own decisions about what to do.

Theologian and pastor Carl Scovil has written that in the early days of Nazi rule, say between 1933 and 1936, what was most important to pastors and their churches in opposing the State was not courage but "the ability to perceive the issues at stake." He said that before there was the sin that we call cowardice there was the sin of confusion. And before there was the virtue of what we call courage there was clarity ("Christian Responses to the Nazi State in Germany," *Katallegete*, Spring 1978, p. 35).

We live in the midst of “two thirteens,” Romans 13 and Revelation 13. Our job, our calling is to perceive the issues at stake, to discern what the God we have come to know through Jesus is doing in this world and then go and join it.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.