

Lectionary 11B 2018, June 17, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

On the official web page of the United States Department of Justice one can read, in full, the speech Attorney General Jefferson Sessions gave in Fort Wayne, Indiana this past week.¹ Most of you have probably heard about his speech on immigration policy and how he referenced the Bible, specifically Romans 13 verse 1. It always catches my attention when a high government official makes a theological point using scripture. After all, my business is theology and the Bible, and I have a responsibility to investigate and maybe comment, if necessary, on how public officials might be using scripture to bolster their claims.

Now, at the very beginning, let me be clear. I am not commenting on or even condemning government officials using the Bible per se. Over the course of our American history many presidents and other officials have referred to scripture as a way of calling Americans to a higher and more noble ideal. For example, Abraham Lincoln famously quoted Matthew chapter 18 in his second inaugural address, stating the Civil War in which the nation was currently suffering through was God's judgment on the United States for allowing the enslavement of African-Americans to exist.² So Attorney General Session's use of the Bible is not in of itself wrong. Still, I wanted to read for myself the context in which he used Romans 13, so I sought out the text of the speech itself. I didn't want to rely on the commentary that's been swirling around in the media over the last few days. As a bit of a historian, it's always better to go to the primary document itself.

I found the speech, as I said, on the official website of the United States Department of Justice. The first thing that jumped out at me was the heading to the speech, "Attorney General Sessions Addresses Recent Criticisms of Zero Tolerance By Church Leaders." Even though the speech was delivered to a mixed group of civic and law enforcement leaders sponsored by the Fort Wayne, Indiana Rotary Club, the purpose was to address criticism leveled by certain church leaders over the current administration's zero tolerance policy concerning immigration. I sought out where in the speech he makes specific reference to statements issued by these church leaders, but I couldn't find any, beyond a broad generalized reference to un-named religious leaders who criticize the policy of separating children from their parents who cross the border seeking asylum. But no specific citations of such criticism.

So, to the use of scripture. Here's exactly what is printed in the text of Attorney General Session's speech, and I quote: "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." When I read that it didn't sound quite right. So I got out my Bible, looked up Romans 13 verse 1 which actually says: "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 from God." There is a subtle, but important, distinction between the two readings. Attorney General Sessions says that the laws of government are to be obeyed because God has ordained them for the purpose of order. But St. Paul says that governing authorities are to be obeyed because they are ordained by God. OK, so what's the difference? Aren't the laws made by the governing authorities?

Government does indeed come from God. Specific forms of government are not God-ordained. St. Paul lived under the Roman Empire, with an autocratic emperor whose word was law. Is that the form of government we should adopt because those are the governing authorities Paul tells us to be subject to? No American today believes that. But God wants us to live orderly

lives together. That's what government is; the human institutions of creating, enforcing, and judging laws that allow us to live peaceably with one another. Over time laws change because conditions in which we live change. Some laws, legally enacted by a governing authority, may be unjust. Laws mandating segregation by race were legally enacted by city councils and state and federal governments. But that did not make them right or just. At times people engaged in acts of civil disobedience, deliberately violating the law in order to call attention to their being unjust. Other times the laws were simply not enforced in recognition that they were indeed unjust.

Romans chapter 13 is among the most famous passages of scripture St. Paul ever wrote. Unfortunately, it has a long and tortured history of use and mis-use. Church and government officials in 1930's Germany used it to justify obedience of Hitler's Nazi regime, telling the people they needed to obey the government because it has been ordained by God. Slave holders in the ante-bellum South used it to justify obedience from their slaves, telling them slavery is legal and they, as slave holders, are their slaves governing authority. Are all earthly governing authorities established and ordained by God? Has God established the governments of North Korea or Syria or Somalia in the same way he has the governments of the United States, Canada and France?

We must be very careful when we start applying passages of scripture too narrowly and taking them out of context, which I believe is what happened here. In Romans chapter 13 St. Paul counsels Christians to live peaceably in the world, obeying the authorities and not making trouble, because he believes the amount of time left here on earth is very short. Christ is coming again, and he is coming very soon. All earthly authorities are going to come to an end and God will rule in his kingdom established for all people. In the meantime, he says, do no wrong and you won't suffer from punishment. Paul sums it all up in the words of Jesus, "Love your neighbor as yourself." "For the one who loves one another has fulfilled the law, love is the fulfilling of the law." (Romans 13: 9, 8, 10)

So, the question that has been swirling around for the last couple of weeks is this: "should children be separated from their parents when they, as a family, illegally cross the border?" Attorney General Sessions mis-quoted Romans chapter 13 verse 1 to justify the current policy. He says the policy is justified because it's legal, and no religious leader should criticize it because laws are ordained by God. Those who cross the border illegally are criminals. Criminals, when they are charged with any crime are separated from their children. It doesn't matter if they are charged with murder, or theft, or crossing the border. A crime is a crime. Such is the logic the Attorney General gave in his speech.

This is a very narrow question. Notice I am not making any public statement about immigration policy in general. If you want my opinion you can ask me, and we can have a respectful, and hopefully fruitful, dialogue. You know me, I don't often make what can be construed as overtly political statements. But in this case, separating children from parents whose only alleged crime is crossing the border is simply cruel and unjust. I'm not saying they shouldn't be detained. I'm not even saying they shouldn't be sent back. I'm not saying that every claim of asylum is always legitimate. But while their cases are being reviewed and decided by government officials, children should not be separated from their parents. For the Attorney General to say his hands are tied and he has no choice but to enforce the law is cruel and cynical. Moreover, it is especially cruel and heartless if separating children from parents is being done to advance a particular political agenda.

When I first heard about the speech this past week I didn't realize it was addressed to religious leaders who criticized the zero-tolerance policy on immigration. But that is made plain on the official website of the Department of Justice. Since I'm a religious leader, and I believe the zero-tolerance policy of separating children from their parents is wrong, then I can only conclude he was addressing his remarks to me. And since his speech was delivered in public, that's why my response is also public. If he's going to quote scripture at me, as a religious leader, I'll quote it right back. But in my case I will quote it word for word, correctly, also from Romans chapter 13, verse 10: "Love does no wrong to the neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

One time Jesus was asked, "Who is my neighbor?" To illustrate he told the story of the Good Mexican, I mean Good Samaritan. I believe these families who have crossed the border are our neighbors. Doing no wrong to them, at the very least, means keeping families together while their cases are decided. We can fulfill the law of love in how we treat our neighbors which is, and always should be, our highest calling. Amen.

¹ <https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-sessions-addresses-recent-criticisms-zero-tolerance-church-leaders>

² <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres32.html>