

September 10, 2017
Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Loving Obedience”

Romans 13:1-10, Matthew 18:1-20

When I was pondering today’s epistle reading where St. Paul starts out *“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities...”* I couldn’t help but think back to the news coverage after our most recent presidential election. I specifically remembered a bunch of protesters walking down some street that night chanting, “Not my president. Not my president.” I remember thinking how foolish that was, that because an election didn’t go the way they wanted, somehow they thought they could redefine their reality so that the guy who without a doubt was the new president somehow wasn’t their president.

But the fact is, that shouldn’t surprise me. The fact is, I was being a hypocrite in even thinking that. I call Jesus Christ “my Lord” and that means I recognized Him as the supreme authority in heaven and earth and especially in my life. You do too. I mean, you’ve called Him “Lord” several times already this morning in our liturgy. But how many times on a daily basis do we casually or outright intentionally deny that reality in sinning in thought, word or deed? Jesus is the sovereign ruler of all that was, is and ever shall be, but we stupidly and repeatedly behave as if our chant is “Not my Lord and God. Not my Lord and God.”

We know why we do this. We are broken in sin. We are conceived under sin’s curse and we haven’t the means to free ourselves. And although Christ has freed us from the curse by His death and resurrection, and that’s why He is indeed our Lord, we walk this life as saint and sinner, struggling against the will of the flesh, struggling against the desire to be gods unto ourselves.

But that’s no excuse. We know Jesus is Lord. So why is it that we struggle so much.

Perhaps one reason is because we consider God’s authority in the same way we think about the world’s authorities. Paying taxes doesn’t really thrill anybody...why not? Because although arguably for our own good, taxes are something we’re compelled to do by force of law. Lots of folks don’t like obeying the speed limit but they more or less do so. Why? Because, for safety’s sake they are compelled to do so by the force of law and the threat of punishment. Think of the many statutes, regulations and rules imposed by governments, workplaces, schools and sports leagues. We don’t obey out of affection for the authority or because it’s what we desire; we obey because if we don’t obey we’ll get punished.

In that way of thinking, if we can bend or break the rules without incurring the penalty, why not do so? There is no reason not to.

So when we plug obedience to God into this same template, it works the same way. We obey God out of fear of punishment, not out of affection. And if we can bend or break the rules without incurring punishment...because Jesus did what He did...why not do it? There’s no reason not to.

Today’s message is simply a reminder of why we seek to obey God.

“Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”

We obey out of love. Yes, this love is a Commandment to be obeyed. Jesus confirmed love of God as the greatest commandment and love of neighbor as the second. But obeying these should be our joy and privilege because they spring from the love showered upon us. St. John tells us that we love because God first loved us.

Think about your very being. God didn't have to create you, but despite knowing beforehand all your sins and rebellions against Him, God created you out of His immeasurable love for you that you would be the object of His love.

In love, unwilling to abandon you to the banishment your sins deserve, the Father sent His only begotten Son to die, that whoever believes in Him would not die, but join with Jesus in everlasting life. Out of love He has given this salvation—gifted it—not in ways you must earn it through your obedience, but in simple mysterious things He does to you—Baptism with water and His Spirit, the Christ's very body and blood in simple bread and wine placed in your mouth, His Gospel proclaimed into your ears. It's all God's love, dumped on you in bucketfuls.

Obedience to the Law, the Ten Commandments, is simply your opportunity to react in love! Think of them in this light! Don't see them as the rules humming you in. View them as what they are—God's design for living out love in your life! There's no fear of punishment in living out love. There is simply joy in responding in kind to the love God has lavished upon you!

Knowing the Gospel of Christ, we really should strive to receive God's law as the good and loving gift that it is. If we're content to let it just be more rules foisted upon us by one more authority, we're going to resent it, and in doing so we're going to resent our loving God also.

What's more, if we think obeying God's law is all about avoiding punishment, what's our response to others when they fail at the law regarding us? The go-to is going to be punishment, not loving forgiveness.

Yet how is it that God reacts to our sin against Him? Reconciliation and forgiveness out of love. Read Matthew 18. What is our default reaction to being sinned against supposed to be? Seeking reconciliation and forgiveness out of love! We can only do this if we embrace the fact that our God is love, and He daily pours out grace and mercy on us in Fatherly love and affection found in no one else.

If you look at God's law and see it as you being under God's thumb, realign your understanding. It's one thing for a bunch of folks to be resenting Donald Trump's legitimate authority and being kind of silly in chanting "Not my President." Trump is just a man, and somewhat of an unknown commodity at that.

It's an entirely greater level of foolishness to look to the Almighty God of love who is made fully known to you in the death and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and grudgingly declare "Not my authority" because you in your sin resent His perfect loving design for His creation.

See God for the love that He is. Love in His Law. Love in His Christ. Love in His Word. Love in His Sacraments. Love in His forgiveness of you. Don't resent Him. Receive Him...and react in love.

Amen.