

WGUMC November 6, 2016 "The Politics of Paul"
Romans 13:1-10

"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 by God." It's hard to imagine a more dangerous passage from St. Paul for this election season! At a time when the country is so distrustful of the governing authorities, we certainly do not want to hear that we must subject ourselves to them. But that is what Paul is saying in the thirteenth chapter of his letter to the Romans.

What was he thinking? The authorities were persecuting Christians, and Christians were supposed to obey and honor and pay taxes to them? Isn't that just sanctifying injustice? And isn't the idea that rulers get their authority directly from God (the divine right of kings) exactly what our founding fathers and mothers rebelled against?

How does a Christian, who is also a believer in democracy and in the Bill of Rights, read this text and apply it to her life?

Perhaps we should first ask how Paul applied those words to his own life. According to the Book of Acts, Paul had all kinds of run-ins with the authorities. He had to leave Damascus because of a plot against him [Acts 9]. He was chased out of Antioch [Acts 13] and fled Iconium [Acts 14]. He was arrested for disturbing the peace in Philippi [Acts 16]. He was accused of turning the world upside down in Thessalonica [Acts 17] and causing a riot in Ephesus [Acts 19]. He was again arrested in Jerusalem and eventually sent to Rome where he remained under house arrest until, as later tradition has it, he was decapitated by the Emperor Nero. [Acts 21 ff]

So, how does one who subjects himself to governing authorities get himself into so much trouble with the governing authorities? And just what does being subject to them mean?

To preach on the politics of Paul, I could launch into a long discussion of the various schools of Christian political philosophy, but I think it will be more helpful if I just tell a story.

This is the story of one Christian for whom the politics of Paul was no abstract theory; it was a lived reality. This is the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer was one of 8 children born to a well-educated, upper middle class family in Breslau, Germany, in 1906. His family tree included several prominent scholars, so it was no surprise when, at the age of 14, he decided to study theology. He went on to the university, wrote two dissertations and served a German congregation in Barcelona in preparation for a teaching career. Before taking his post, he spent a year at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

Being an uber-intellectual, Bonhoeffer didn't think much of Americans and their theology. But he was impressed by how we put it into practice. He learned a lot about the social gospel and spent time at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. When he went home to Germany, he brought recordings of

Negro spirituals with him. It was the year 1929, and he didn't think that Germany had a race problem like America did.

In Germany, in the 30's, Bonhoeffer got involved in the worldwide ecumenical movement and became a pacifist. Two days after Hitler became Chancellor, Bonhoeffer did a radio broadcast in which he warned that Germany was slipping into idolatry. Government censors cut him off mid-speech, and that was just the beginning.

The next year, the Nazi's passed the Aryan Clause that prohibited Jews from holding positions in the government, and Bonhoeffer begged the church to stand up and protect the state from itself. ["Introduction," in *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*] He even nailed leaflets to trees and tried to enlist his fellow pastors in his protests, but few were willing to risk it. Over the next several years, Bonhoeffer watched in horror as the Church in Germany sold its soul to the Nazis.

In 1934, Bonhoeffer was given the opportunity to lead an underground seminary for students who were in opposition to Hitler and his German Christians. While he and his students conducted radical experiments in Christian community, he wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*. It was published in 1937, the same year the Gestapo shut down the seminary.

In that now famous book, Bonhoeffer reflects on Romans 13. This teacher of theology who opposed the Nazis at every turn writes that Christians are not to resist the powers, at least not in the way that the world resists. Bonhoeffer says that God has ordered life in such a way that the world exercises its dominion by force, but Christ and his Christians conquer by service. [*The Cost of Discipleship*, 261] Christ emptied himself of power and took the form of a servant, and we must, too. We must obey the will of God whether the State is good or bad. And if the state makes us suffer for it, then we are doing just

what Christ did. That is the burden and the blessing of the cross. [ibid., 262-3]

I suspect that Bonhoeffer knew even then what was in store for him. Still, he chose to obey the will of God instead of the will of the Nazis. He resisted their evil with every fiber of his being, but he did not resist paying the cost of discipleship.

After *Kristallnacht*, the night of broken glass when Jewish businesses and synagogues were vandalized and burned, Bonhoeffer was one of the few Christian leaders who spoke out in defense of the Jews.

By 1939, Bonhoeffer was in line to be drafted. As a Christian and a pacifist that was a huge problem. He could not take up arms nor could he swear an oath of allegiance to a man he considered to be an Anti-Christ. So his American friends quickly arranged a summer lecture series for him in the States. But as soon as he arrived, he started making plans for his return. In a letter to his American sponsors, he wrote:

I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.... [Introduction, 36-37]

In returning to Germany, Bonhoeffer was living his own interpretation of Paul's words about being subject to the authorities. Bonhoeffer subjected himself to the likelihood of punishment because his faith in Christ was stronger than his fear of the Nazis, just as Paul's faith in Christ was stronger than his fear of the Romans.

Back home, his brother-in-law was a member of a group of military intelligence officers who were opposed to Hitler and plotting against him. Bonhoeffer agreed to join them. He even served as a double agent, traveling to London and to Sweden to deliver secret messages to the allies through the leaders of their churches. After two attempts on Hitler's life in March of 1943, Bonhoeffer and others were arrested. For the next two

years, his only contact with the outside world was through letters that friendly guards helped him smuggle out of prison.

After Hitler survived another failed assassination attempt in July, 1944, there would be few letters. The Nazis had found solid evidence linking Bonhoeffer to the plotters. Even then, a guard offered to help him escape but by that time his brother was also in prison and he didn't want to endanger him. So Bonhoeffer was moved to another prison in Berlin and then to Buchenwald and then to Flossenberg. And there on April 9, 1945, after leading a prayer service, Bonhoeffer was led out and hanged. It was just two weeks before American soldiers arrived to liberate the camp.

The story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer has been an inspiration and a call to action for millions of Christians, including me. His life puts flesh on Paul's words about being subject to governing authorities. And his witness is always timely, but especially so now when our own country is so dangerously divided.

Christians, regardless of their political party, need to hear that their allegiance is first to Christ, and Christ sets the standard for leadership. Good leaders are servants not dictators. And when governing authorities abuse their power or threaten to—when nationalism, racism, and xenophobia run amok as they did in Nazi Germany—our faith in Christ compels us to take action for Christ. But we have no right to protest unless we are willing to pay the price. Standing for Christ means being willing to subject oneself to all kinds of punishments. Grace is free, but discipleship is costly.

We could say the same thing about citizenship. So, go to the polls on Tuesday, if you haven't already voted. Just remember the politics of Paul. Keep in mind that you are a citizen of the kingdom of God before you are a citizen of this country and take this vow: I pledge allegiance to Jesus Christ and to God's kingdom for which he died, one Spirit-led people

the world over, indivisible, with love and justice for all. [©

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