

Sermon: Misunderstood Scripture #3 - "Obey Authority!" Romans 13:1-8
 Rev. Steve Clifton August 25, 2019 Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa, ON



On our last trip to Ireland we visited the region from which my great, great, grandparents came to Canada, in and around the 1840s. Lydia McClelland came from Bailieborough in County Cavan, and the church that her family attended, a Presbyterian church, had an unusual architectural feature. This region of Ireland in the late 18th Century was home to the United Irishmen, These were Irish Protestants who were tired of English rule. They wanted to be free of the British monarchy and joined their Catholic neighbours in rebellion against the crown. The pastor of the Presbyterian Church would bring a broad sword into his pulpit on Sunday mornings and in his anti-monarchical fervor he would slam his great blade on his podium for emphasis while he preached. So the pulpit of the Presbyterian Church in Bailieborough is hacked and marked by the preacher's sword.

For the Sundays of August we have been looking at passages of Scripture that are often misused or misunderstood. Our Holy Book is sometimes used in a way that does violence to its true meaning.



On the first Sunday in August we read Paul's command in his first letter to the Corinthians: Women must be silent! But then we remembered that the Jesus movement was from its origins a radically gender inclusive community, that women were give prominent roles, and positions of vocal leadership, even by Paul himself and so we come to understand those words in a new way. And no one is silenced.



Two weeks ago we considered one of the 6 single verses in the Bible that are sometimes taken out and used like a cudgel against the LGBTQ2 community. On this Capital Pride Sunday we remember that violence against sexual minorities may sometimes be rooted in what are called the *clobber verses*: 6 verses pulled out from a book of more than 31000 verses. We learned that the word *homosexual appeared* for the first time in an English translation of the Bible in 1946 and that this was a deeply flawed translation. For two millennia the verse clobbered no one.

And we considered the radical inclusiveness of Jesus and his call to love, his loving compassion which spills over into so many verses of Scripture and reflected on how we are called to emulate our compassionate and inclusive Saviour as we follow in his way. In September we will celebrate becoming an Affirming ministry of the United Church of Canada



Last week Sharon shared the words of Jesus... that he “comes to bring fire to the earth”... and she explained the words in context, not as words about coming wrath and fury, but as an image of firing up an oven, getting things started, getting the show on the road...



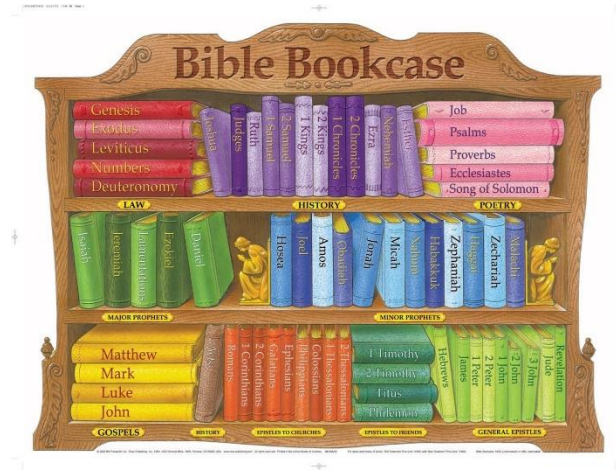
In this sermon series too, we have met Robert Estienne, a French scholar and printer who lived in Paris in the 16th Century. In 1568 he printed a French translation of the New Testament. And he included a new innovation. He broke the text down into numbered verses.

And in doing his work, Estienne did not take care to consider the verse marking carefully. He did this work while riding on horseback, travelling from Paris to Lyon.



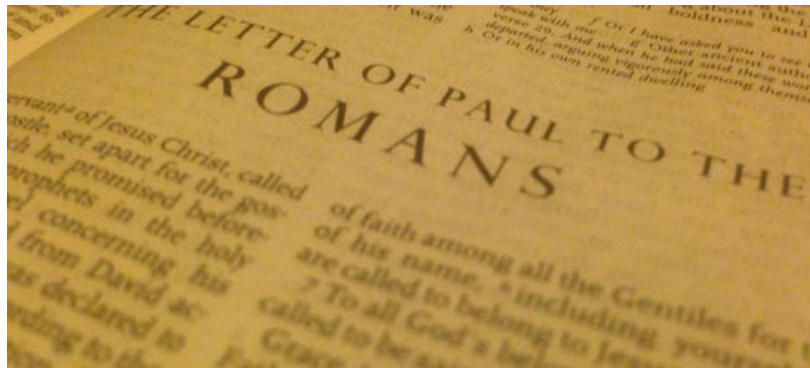
When we open our Bibles we will see a text divided into chapter and verse. But this is a recent innovation; for most of Christian history the text flowed on undivided.

The creation of numbered verses is helpful. It is also problematic as it tempts the reader to see Scripture as a collection of discrete statements having meaning and application on their own, in isolation from the larger work, apart from the greater narrative. Having verses in the text makes it seem that each phrase carries a weight that was never intended.



And then there is the fact the Bible is not a book. It is a compendium of books. It's like a library. And the Books of the Bible need to read with an understanding of their author, audience, intention and literary type.

In Scripture there is poetry and history, prophecy and gospel, epistle and apocalypse... Take the Book of Jonah for instance. We can read it as literal history, the story of a man evading God and being swallowed by a whale. Or we can read it as a rabbinic tale full of humor and wonder, told to tell a truth about us and about God. We read different kinds of writing in different ways. So identifying the literary type is important if we are to make sense of what we read.



And then there is the fact that some Books of the Bible are hard to read. There is Revelation with its symbols and numbers and visions. And there the Epistle to the Romans from which comes our verse from today.

Here is the misunderstood verse for this week: "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." (Romans 13:1)

Or as one modern American evangelical interpreter puts it in a blog written this year: "Paul commanded Christian submission to the governing authorities, whether we like who is in charge or the policies the government enacts. "

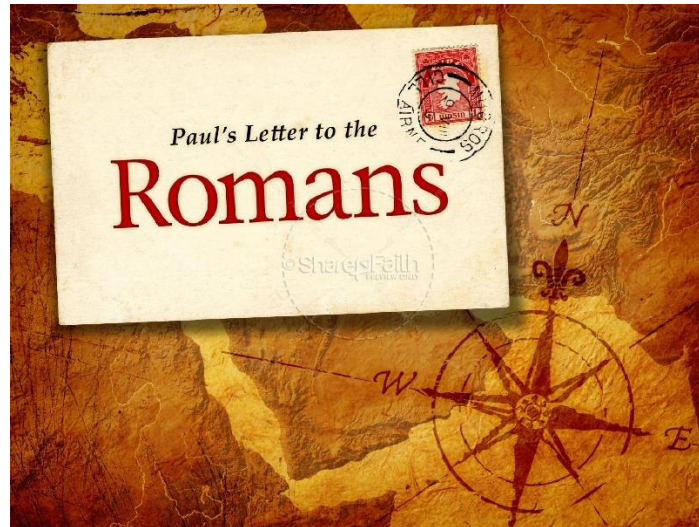


As followers of Christ, according to this interpretation of the text, we are to obey authority. Obey governments. Obey leaders. No matter what...And this interpretation of this one verse, pulled from context has done great harm over the span of Christian history.

Romans 13:1 has been used during several of human history's darkest moments, including in support of Nazi Germany where it was used to justify authoritarian rule. Proponents of Southern slavery used it to justify the buying and selling of Africans. South Africans used it to buttress apartheid.

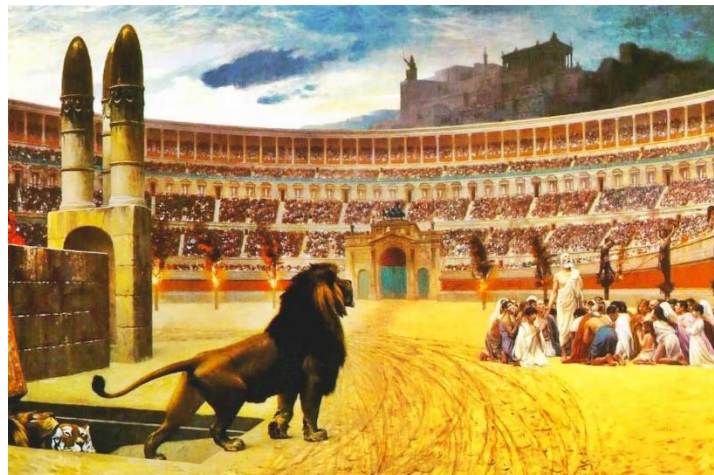
And very recently former U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions used it in an effort to convince Christians that his policy of separating migrant families at the Mexican border is "wholesome, godly and biblical." He said "I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained the government for his purposes..."

Romans 13 has been applied to numerous situations over the years when governments needed to justify adherence to otherwise immoral actions by the state.



So...our often misunderstood text for today comes from Romans. It's an epistle. By literary type it's a letter written by Paul to the churches of Rome. It's one side of a two way conversation. We don't get to hear the other side directly. Paul is writing to a particular people, in a particular social and cultural context, one that is very foreign to us, in a language we do not know. So we have to tread carefully.

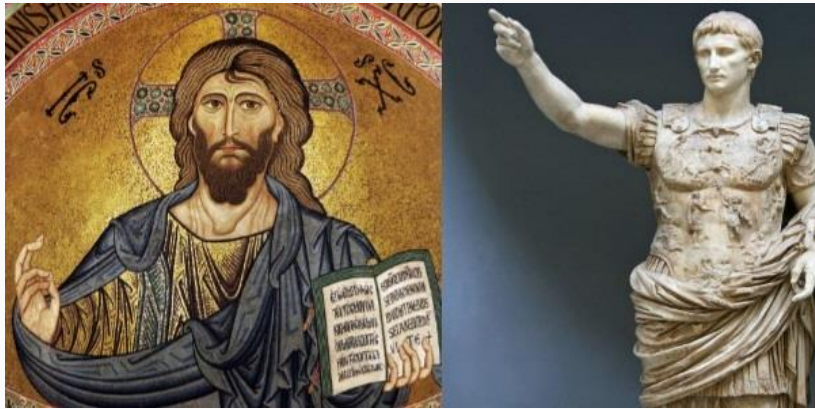
And Romans is not an easy read. Evangelical scholar Scot McKnight argues that Romans should be read backwards. The last few chapters should be read first so that you can get the context to which the letter is written. And he says that most people get exhausted by the first 9 chapters, which are quite dense, and so by the time they get to Chapter 10, 11... they are no longer able to really get the message. They can absorb no more.



Careful scholarship highlights that Romans 13 should not be used to quell dissent everywhere and always because it comes from a specific historical period when Christians faced persecution from the Roman Emperor Nero.

Nero set fire to a part of his city so that he could expand his palaces and blamed the event on Christians. Nero is said to have had Christians dipped in oil and set on fire to light his gardens at night. He fed Jesus followers to lions in the Coliseum. The Christian community in Rome in Paul's time was a few hundred people, mostly slaves, led by women, not people of power or influence. It makes perfect sense that Paul would commend the fledgling church to keep its head down, to avoid rocking the boat, to submit quietly to the prevailing political winds. They had no choice. They lived under the authority of a dictator who killed them for sport.

Paul's words surely are not universal; it's not everyone everywhere who needs to obey authority. That's why he writes in Colossians, in that other text we read, that Christ "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... he is the beginning,, so that he might come to have first place in everything." For Paul Christ is greater than any authority or government.



The first creed of the Church, spoken in Antioch in the years right after Jesus ministry, in the time of Paul's ministry was "Jesus is Lord". At that time and in that place Caesar was Lord and everyone was to acknowledge it; it is an act of defiance to say that Jesus is owed a greater allegiance, that Jesus not Caesar is Lord.

In the United Church of Canada, one of our founding denominations was the Congregationalist Church. These people, also called "Puritans" left Europe to be free of government interference and free of authority meddling with their faith. They came to North America to escape the kings and rulers at home, to be free to follow Christ as they saw was faithful. God came before kings. And to live this out they had to leave Europe.

My great, great grandmother's church with its sword wielding pastor clearly did not passively submit to authority.



And in Nazi Germany, the Confessing Church was formed to stand against the idea that Christians had to obey government. In 1934 they penned the Barnem declaration: “When Bishops fail we must not follow...we must obey God before man [sic]”



Today on the Mexican border with the USA, Christian churches share communion through the border fences to show solidarity with those migrants on the other side, and Christian activists get arrested as they put water in the deserts between Mexico and the USA, to aid refugees as they make their way to the border.



The writer of Romans 13 is Paul, a Jewish person raised in the Jewish tradition, a Jewish religious scholar, a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee.

Our Jewish sisters and brothers south of the border have had their loyalty questioned of late. And in defense of the sometimes rightness of disloyalty to power, Rabbi Irwin Keller wrote this just last week.

Oath of Disloyalty: Irwin Keller August 21, 2019

I am a disloyal Jew.
 I am not loyal to a political party.
 Nor will I be loyal to dictators and mad kings.
 I am not loyal to walls or cages.
 I am not loyal to taunts or tweets.
 I am not loyal to hatred...

I am not loyal to any foreign power.
 Nor to abuse of power at home.
 I am not loyal to a legacy of conquest, erasure and exploitation.
 I am not loyal to stories that tell me who I should hate.

I am a loyal Jew.
 I am loyal to the inconveniences of kindness.
 I am loyal to the dream of justice.
 I am loyal to this suffering Earth
 And to all life.
 ... I am loyal to the children who will come
 And to the quality of world we leave them.
 To freedom and welcome,
 Holiness, hope and love.

Writing from the same religious tradition as Rabbi Keller Paul writes: “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.”

He writes these words to a group of oppressed, powerless people who live under violent repression, under the threat a mad emperor. The *everyone* Paul is writing to is a group of 100 people of little influence, living under extreme threat. When Paul addresses “everyone” it’s not everyone, everywhere and always.

In 1744, Congregationalist clergyman Elisha Williams, then rector of Yale University remarked that Romans 13:1 was “often wrecked and tortured by such wits as were disposed to serve the designs of arbitrary power.” This text has been misused over centuries in support of wrong doing by the powerful.

But... as Paul write elsewhere: “Christ is first in everything.”

And only Jesus, our loving, compassionate Savior is Lord.