

Title: A Higher Authority  
Text: Romans 13: 8 – 10  
Date: July 1, 2018

As we lift up the painful and complex plight of immigrants and refugees today, it is good to be clear that we are not only responding to current headlines – which we are – but we are also building upon a long history of Presbyterians advocating on behalf of immigrants. Even on the Presbyterian planning calendar, this past June 20<sup>th</sup> was highlighted as World Refugee Day, and today is declared Immigration Sunday. Who could have foreseen how timely this topic would have been for today?

Hopefully it is no surprise that I want to bring our scriptural heritage to bear on this, but I am mindful that the Bible is a text that is less often read, than read into. It is sobering how ingrained biases and prejudices seem to be preeminent both when formulating policy, and when reading scripture.

The Brookings Institution has documented trends showing an accelerated decrease in the non-Hispanic white population, and so it is believed that much of the backlash against immigrants today may be rooted in a deep fear of losing our “white American identity.”

Another curious observation is that in terms of public opinion, the states with the most vocal backlash against immigration are also the states with the fewest immigrant residents. It would seem that you are more likely to be afraid of that which you don't know.

With that in mind, it would be fair for me to highlight my own background and biases. I have lived for 18 years in two of the most diverse cities in the US: New York City and Los Angeles. I have lived overseas for 9 years, and have often been in circumstances where I was the only white person.

And let me tell you about the neighborhood where I currently live. The house directly across the street from me has a couple of Hispanic families living there, and they are wonderful people. The family to my left is from Pakistan. The family to my right, and across the street from them, are Russian Jewish immigrants. As a matter of fact, I have learned through them that there are 13 Russian Jewish immigrant families in the broader neighborhood. Also in my neighborhood is a Korean family, a Chinese family, an Indian family, a family from Kyrgyzstan, a handful of African-American families, a handful of Hispanic families, a handful of WASPs, and a handful of interracial couples. It's a great neighborhood.

So let me be clear about my biases. I love immigrants! My mother is an immigrant, my wife is an immigrant, my son is an immigrant. I have no fear whatsoever of “losing my country” to immigrants.

I picked our Romans 13 passage not only because of the life-giving truth it conveys, but also because of how this chapter has recently been abused by people who are not honest about their biases.

I believe it was June 14 when Attorney General Jeff Sessions defended the Trump administration's policy of separating immigrant children from their families at the border by referencing this chapter. **“I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13,”** Sessions said, **“to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order.”** White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders summed up the same idea: **“It is very biblical to enforce the law.”**

I doubt that Sessions knew that Romans 13 was significant to American history because it played a critical role in the American Revolution. Loyalists who favored obedience to King and Parliament quoted Romans 13 for obvious reasons.

Likewise I doubt that he knew that Romans 13 entered the public debate in 1850 with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. That law gave teeth to a provision in the Constitution by requiring that state officials and even **“all good citizens”** aid in returning people who had escaped slavery.

How dangerous to lift a verse from scripture to twist it for your own use. To responsibly use that passage, it would have to be understood in the entirety of Romans 12 and 13 where Paul sets out guidelines for the Christian communities in Rome. Those guidelines begin with a charge *not* to be conformed to this world. (Rom. 12:2) In this broader context the Christian community must not follow any authority that causes them to violate the law of love that we read this morning. Remember as well that Paul was arrested by the government because Christians challenged the government. That’s one of the reasons he was killed.

Getting closer to our Presbyterian heritage, John Calvin argued in a long exposition on this passage that *all* the powers were ordained by God, including not just the king, but also all the lesser magistrates. Those lower ranked officials were expected to resist kings **“when they tyrannise and insult over the humbler of the people,”** and Calvin listed the people in the Bible who had resisted **“slavish obedience to the depraved wishes”** of lawfully constituted authority. While American Loyalists invoked the law-and-order interpretation of Romans 13, Patriot clergy argued that only *just* authorities were to be obeyed.

Sessions, like so many other Americans throughout history, thinks he has the Bible on his side. The verses Sessions chose to cite, and the interpretation that he has given them, is part of the broader Trump administration strategy of playing to the fears and identities of American evangelicals, who have been bringing Romans 13 back into public discourse since the rise of law-and-order politics and the Christian Right. I have had these verses thrown at me personally over these past couple of years by evangelicals I have known.

Make America great again? What era is being referred to? Originally there were no immigration laws whatsoever, and European settlers just came over and claimed land for their own. Do you want to go back to then? In 1790 George Washington signed the first Naturalization Act restricting citizenship to **“any alien, being a free white person”** who had been in the U.S. for two years. Do you want to go back to then? Do you want to go back to 1882 when the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed? The Immigration Act of 1924 was the first time a quota system was introduced. By far, it was people of Northern European and Scandinavian countries that were allowed in to become citizens. A much smaller percentage of people from Southern and Eastern European countries were allowed in to become citizens. A quite small percentage of “others” were allowed in . . . but still no more Asians. Do you want to go back to then? I don’t. It wasn’t until the The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that the National Origins Formula was ended.

You see the laws have constantly been changing, and they need to change again. It is not a matter of making America great *again*. It is a matter of envisioning what kind of country we want to be. I would like to envision a country where we are not afraid of people who look different than we do. I would like to envision a lawmaker who quotes Romans 10: **“For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all.”**

I am not here to tell you which Senate Bill to vote, but I am here to remind you that every policy decision is a moral decision. Our Judeo-Christian tradition repeatedly reminds us to care for the

alien. One of many sample verses is: **“Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt.”** (Ex. 23:9)

I am not smart enough to draft an immigration bill, but I would suggest a subtle shift in our Zero Tolerance policy. Simply drop the word “zero!” Instead criminalizing people who have left everything to flee for their very lives, perhaps we could remember how Jesus sorts people when he says, **“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”** (Matt. 25:40)

Instead of tearing children away from the arms of their parents, we could remember the words of this same Jesus who also said, **“Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”** (Luke 18:16) And on this note I should add how moved and proud I am of the thousands who took to the streets yesterday to appeal for families to stay together – mostly women - to speak as the conscience of America. This is what democracy looks like – being a voice for those who have no voice. Aside from the pain heaped upon pain in the present, I fear that we are naïve as to how this pain will manifest itself as these children eventually become adults. This is not a moral gray area!

Remember my description of my neighborhood earlier? I am fully aware that some would view that as the very picture of infestation. I would suggest, however, that it is closer to the words found in Revelation where there is a heavenly vision of **“a great multitude from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,”** (Rev. 7:9) If this then is our destiny, I would suggest that now is the time to learn to find joy in that vision.

There is so much more that could be said, but let me conclude by reminding you that the next time you hear a “law and order” Christian quote Romans 13:1, ask them to read on to the higher authority expressed just a few verses further: **“for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. . . . Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”**

Amen.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/06/21/us-white-population-declines-and-generation-z-plus-is-minority-white-census-shows/>

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.vi.xxi.html>

Romans 13: 8 – 10 (NRSV)

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; 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, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.