

June 17, 2018
National Presbyterian Church
Caring for Children and Respecting the State
Daniel 6:1-10, Romans 13:1-8
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This past Thursday, our Attorney General quoted Scripture to justify the enforcement of immigration laws and processes that involved the separation of about 2000 children of from their parents, seeking residency in the United States. And many people – including me – are profoundly disturbed both by what we see as *an assault on family values* and by the *irresponsible and deeply flawed use of the Bible by a public official*.

I realize, of course, that the matter that stands behind these events –immigration itself, and immigration laws and processes – are notoriously complicated, and I want to state from the outset that I resolutely believe that it is really important to affirm that any nation has the right to protect its borders and to limit and control those who enter and leave.

In fact, every organization that is worth something – has to do this *even if some get left out* so

- Not everyone gets to play on for the Washington Capitals
- OR to serve in the Marines
- OR to practice law or medicine
- OR to join my family or yours
- OR even this church!

There are standards of knowledge and conduct and belief that are important for the existence and effectiveness of any organization or nation. And – YES – they need to be enforced. And there will always be difficult situations, painful situations, unfair and unjust situations, where someone does not make the cut. In an imperfect world that’s just the way it is. As Churchill said” “Democracy is the worst of all forms of government, except for all the rest.” In other words, democracy is not perfect, and never will be. Tragedy, as Shakespeare knew, is never far off.

BUT When it comes to *the use the Bible to justify a particular approach to resolving a problem*

- One that involves *the separation of hundreds of children from their parents*
- and effectively uses children *as pawns in a political game*

then we are NOT JUST in a political conversation BUT in a profoundly religious conversation, a Biblical, and a Christian one – in which the truth of the Gospel and the soul of our nation is at stake and in which bedrock understandings of our Christian culture and ethos are being thrown away at a rapid pace.

And this, I’m sure, is what the devil loves most: it’s all in the name of the Bible! And Jesus, who, lest we forget it said (Matthew 16:26), “***What does it profit us, if we gain the whole world – but lose our souls?***” In other words, “What does it profit if we enforce all our laws, and if we keep the nation pure and law-abiding, *but we become a people who cannot see that we have become cruel and loveless?*”

So let’s be clear: *it is not* my job as a pastor to know what the right political policies should be to resolve the immigration issues we face. BUT *it is* my job to know what the Bible says about

- *Children* and about
- the *responsibilities and limits of Government*

so that we as citizens can think Christianly and Biblically about the great issues of our day – even if we divide politically on the actual solutions. The Bible shares PRINCIPLES NOT TACTICS. But in this case, the Attorney General has clearly stepped over into *my* turf!

So, this morning – what I want to share is a Biblical word

- First, about children and families
- and second, about the scriptural approach to Government

I. First Of All – About Children And Families.

It may seem rather trivial or far-fetched to point to the story of Jesus welcoming children in Mark 10, and apply it to our present situation – but it is actually of enormous importance. Let me read it to you.

Mark 10:13-16 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.
But when Jesus saw this, ***he was indignant*** and said to them,
*“Let the little children come to me; do not stop them;
for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.
Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God
as a little child will never enter it.”*
16 And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Of course, this was a really nice thing to do: “welcoming and blessing the children.” And it shows Jesus’ kindness and humility. **But it was more than that.** It was part of a repeated pattern in Jesus’ ministry to get people *to see each other* in a different way: to notice those *on the down-side of society* as much as those on the top. In other words, Mark 10 with the children is echoed in Matthew 25, where Jesus speaks about “*What you do to the least of these my children, you do to me.*”

So in the story with the children, you need to notice that Jesus **gets indignant** when people – especially his own followers, his own disciples miss this point, and when they misrepresent Jesus, as if to say, “*Our man Jesus is too important for insignificant little people.*”

Jesus, here, doesn’t mince words – he takes them on – he rebukes them.

What if we read his words with a look of anger, and a pronounced shout rather than as if they were just causal comments: “***LET . . . THE LITTLE CHILDREN . . . COME TO ME; DO . . . NOT . . . STOP . . . THEM; FOR IT IS TO SUCH AS THESE THAT THE KINGDOM OF GOD BELONGS.***”

And then Jesus not only turns away from his disciples, BUT he turns to, welcomes and blesses these ones who are least significant: the children.

And in this he’s doing nothing other than getting back to the Bible, and especially to numerous passages – over 150 – that speak about caring for, and noticing widows, strangers, immigrants ***and children who are orphans.***

Listen:

First from the New Testament, written after Jesus’ life:

In the **Letter of James** (1.27):

- *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this:
to care for orphaned children and widows in their distress.*

And then in the Old Testament, Jesus’ Bible:

In the **Book of Psalms** God is actually given a title:

- “Father of orphans and protector of widows” (Ps. 68:5), because, the Psalmist believes,
- “The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphaned child and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.” (Ps.146.9)

The prophet Isaiah admonishes God’s people to

- “learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphaned child, plead for the widow” (1.17)

And the prophet Jeremiah says that God commands us to

- “Act with justice and righteousness. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphaned child, and the widow” (22:3)

And all this stems from **Moses in Exodus and Deuteronomy** who gives God’s commandment that (Exod. 22.22)

- “You shall not abuse any widow or orphan.”

And it’s Moses who reminds God’s people (10.18) that

- You shall not deprive a resident immigrant or an orphan of justice (24:17)
- and “When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the immigrant, the orphan, and the widow.” (24:21)
- The Lord your God executes justice for the child who is an orphan and the widow, and loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (10:18)

And for Moses a fitting conclusion for this whole emphasis would be

- “**Cursed** be anyone who deprives the immigrant, the orphan, and the widow of justice.” All the people shall say, “Amen!”(27:19)

Amen!

As if to say, “Do you get it? Tell me! SAY ‘AMEN’ if you get it” And they do!

So here is this constant Biblical theme that links together all kinds of people who do not have power or rights -- and this includes children.

DON’T LOSE YOUR SOUL – says Jesus and the whole Bible – by forgetting those at the bottom of the pile whom God never forgets.

So – this is a Biblical word about CHILDREN.

What about a Biblical word on GOVERNMENT? . . .

Back to Thursday: Mr. Sessions justified the actions of the government by turning to the Bible and quoting a really important passage in Paul’s Letter to the Romans, in chapter 13, which begins like this:

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.

And who could disagree? Without good government there is anarchy and chaos: and in the Bible, anarchy and chaos are enemies of God (the creation story in Genesis 1 is not just about God producing something out of nothing; but about God producing “good” order out of chaos).

And in the first century (and in many other centuries) the Christians needed to know that just because the Roman government was pagan or godless that was not a good excuse in and of itself for abandoning the secular law!

BUT, at the same time, *the idea that this statement was “an absolute truth” would never have been in Paul’s mind!* He knew what Jesus had said on politics (he refers indirectly but clearly to Jesus’ teaching on this matter in Romans 13:6-7)

*“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s
 (“Caesar is the Roman emperor, the secular political power)
 and to God, what is God’s (Matthew 22:1)*

As if to say,

“You have to think carefully about your allegiances because, while each has a legitimate claim on your life, and there will be times when you can serve both your secular ruler and your divine ruler, *there will also be times* when your godly conscience will not permit you to keep the law of the land! There will be times when what God demands will overrule what the state demands, and when civil disobedience is the RIGHT THING TO DO!

We saw it in our Scripture reading in Daniel 6: when the law of the land in Persia told Daniel *not to pray* he did it anyway:

All the presidents of the kingdom, all your officials are agreed that the king should establish and enforce an ordinance that whoever prays to anyone, divine or human, for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions . . . But, although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously. Daniel 6:7, 10

So Daniel BREAKS the law – and becomes a hero in God’s sight because of it.

And then, of course, most famously, Moses does it too! In Exodus 5-14, he resists the government of Egypt when his people are in slavery – and calls for their release – not just so people can worship in freedom (though that’s part of it: Exodus 9:13), but just as much to gain escape from political oppression. And he succeeds – he has God’s blessing.

And in our own nation’s history this story of **godly and justified DISobedience to secular authority** has been used to justify three political actions in particular:

- Most recently: the modern Civil Rights Movement (in the 1900s)
- In the 1800s, the Civil War,
- and in the 1700s, the American Revolution itself

In fact, scholar Scott Langston writes:

A couple of months after American colonists declared their independence from Great Britain, a committee composed of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams proposed a design for a national seal.

It portrayed the Egyptian pharaoh leading his troops through a divided Red Sea in pursuit of the fleeing Israelites. Surrounding this scene were the words, “*Rebellion to Tyrants IS Obedience to God.*”

https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/TB6_Exodus_SL.pdf
The Exodus in American History and Culture By Scott M. Langston

The seal never became a reality, but the point is that the story of Moses’ rebellion against the prevailing government was certainly in the minds of our founding fathers.

So sure – *most of the time* Christians are to be law-abiding citizens (Franklin, Jefferson and Adams, of all people, knew the urgency of getting the law, founded on a new constitution, in place!). And the most beautiful biblical passage in this regard is from Jeremiah 29:7, where Jeremiah tells Jewish exiles *living in a foreign land*, to

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare

This is the Christian posture *most of the time* – spoken more forcefully in Romans 13: Obey the Government! Pay your taxes, keep the building codes, don't practice medicine without a license, drive on the right side of the road! Order is better than chaos and anarchy.

But where there is blatant injustice that goes against the teaching of Jesus and the Bible, woe to us if we remain silent or *carelessly obedient* as Isaiah the prophet put it God's response to such irresponsibility is to say to us:

Isaiah 1:15-17, 19-20 When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; *seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow*. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; 20but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; [DR: ***In other words: ignore the weak and your nation will fall! It will never be great***] for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

So, says Jesus, **we have to balance things out – prayerfully and Biblically**, to know when and how we

- Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's
- and Render to God the things that are God's

And, *as* we do so, we have been called to focus

- Not just on the powerful . . .
- But on the weak – the unnoticed under-belly of society, the “least of these” – the children!

And *when* we do so, as faithful citizens of a nation we love, who are also followers of Christ, I believe that that's when Jesus will take us, and our nation, on his knees, ***and bless us***.

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