

First United Methodist Church

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We've all heard it done. It likely that we've done it ourselves. I know I have. You know, picking a verse out of the Bible and quoting it to make a point to help support something we're doing or that we believe. The truth is, it's so easy to do because we all have our favorite Bible verse, or we know the verses that support what we believe, and if you dig deep enough you can probably find a verse in the Bible that supports whatever position or issue you want.

What has me thinking about this is that earlier this week a political figure at the national level in our nation quoted the Bible at a press conference, or some public setting, and his words quickly stirred up quite a strong public reaction. The reason for the response, I believe, is that the speaker misused the passage by not understanding or valuing the setting in which the passage was originally written. Let me explain.

The passage in question comes from Paul's letter to the Romans in the New Testament of our Bible. Specifically, the section is Romans 13:1-7 in which Paul, the writer, states that "everyone" including Christians, or Jesus followers, are to obey the government officials. On the surface it seems pretty straight forward, but is it? What about if you dig deeper?

Now, there is so much that can be said about Paul's letter to the Romans that I don't have time to go into in this brief writing, but keep in mind that Rome was the epicenter of the Roman Empire. Christians were not viewed particularly favorably, though there was a growing acceptance. Paul was writing to "church" in Rome to prepare the way for his coming there, and at the same time he was also addressing an issue and a growing question.

I believe Paul was trying to help set the tone for how Christians are to live in the midst of political and governmental systems in a time when there was significant political unrest. Paul was very clear, Jesus is Lord. He states that over and over. But he is also stating that governments are needed to provide some sense of order and structure in society, even if we don't always like it or agree with it. I believe Paul is trying to help people grasp and live out the question, "What would Jesus do?" And to be clear, Jesus did take on the governmental and religious authorities of his day, but his method and message was unique. That's what Paul is getting at, I believe.

For me, what is key to helping us understand this passage is to realize Paul is not writing as one in authority in the government demanding obedience or compliance. No, he's writing as a citizen, with some influence within a circle of society, who is trying to help Jesus followers figure out how to live in the tension of following Jesus but also living in a pagan and secular society and culture. Paul is not writing as one having authority with the government. He's writing as one under the authority of the government.

The problem, as I see it, is the government official who spoke of this passage earlier in the week, was speaking as a government official that seems to be trying to justify the government's actions in a specific situation or help gain compliance from those involved, or the masses. To me, using Paul's writings and what we believe to be God's Word, in this way misses the mark of what is intended.

I am so glad we have the Bible. I try to read from it daily, though I miss that mark at times. I strive to allow it to guide my words, my actions, and the way I live. But I also understand that it takes work to find the nuggets of truth that are waiting to be found. That is part of the fun and intrigue of the faith journey, discovering what God has for me to learn today. Let's keep on living and looking for the nuggets of truth in God's Word for our lives today.

Serving Together,

Pastor Keith