

OVER THRONE

Texts on Sunday, February 28, 2010

Romans 13: 1-10

Many years ago, I spent my working days in the hill towns west of Albany. One January evening, I was talking with a sheriff's deputy posted up there. He told me that all winter long, whenever the roads were slippery with snow and ice, his patrol car, wherever he parked it, caused drivers to crash. On seeing his vehicle—and fearing his judgment and hoping to escape it—they would brake fast—and too fast for the road conditions—and spin and sail out of control, on into a snowbank or another car. The deputy hated to see this, but what was he to do? Park where no cars go? Feeling guilty, and desiring to avoid punishment, drivers ended with nasty punishments self-inflicted, and often a ticket too.

Now, this makes for light laughter as a story—but only because we recognize ourselves in the misbehavior and because these incidents did not generally result in serious harm. But perhaps laughter's open door can usher us into a room where we can observe something more significant about ourselves and our appreciation for the law and its guardians.

“Be subject to the governing authorities,” writes the apostle Paul, “for there is no authority except from God . . . Rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad.” Be subject? Many Americans would object, “No! Be *suspect* of governing authorities!” After all, we Americans are born with a nose for too much power. It's right there in the Declaration of Independence. “When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds . . .” Our founding fathers and mothers were certainly not “subject to the governing authorities” and would hardly agree with Paul that their rulers were a terror only to bad conduct. Some part of us is always awake to the possibility of tyranny. We see it on the television as Paul could never have imagined—on the streets of Tehran last spring, in Rangoon two years ago, when Buddhist monks were crushed in the streets, in Birmingham and Selma some decades ago. Be subject? We Americans struggle with such a counsel. But on this occasion of celebration and appreciation for you officers of the law, let us go deeper with the word. Be subject? That's our subject.

The concerns of religion for love and compassion, and the concerns of the government for obedience and order often seem quite separate. Just yesterday morning, a group of us was reading a 1788 statement written by Presbyterians in Philadelphia, who were re-asserting that Christians must accept that the public powers of religion are limited to words, especially to God's Word, and may never assume the powers of coercion, which belong only to the governing authorities by means of the police. Religion and police may seem like very different sectors of human affairs.

But let us consider the possibility, set deep in Paul's counsel, that love and justice are not at all separate, not even if justice must be applied with force; but that love and justice are the braids in the rope of right relationship on which all society depends—so intertwined that justice without love is not just, and love without justice is not loving. This is what it can mean to say that there is no authority except from God. The work of the kingdom is one.

2010 marks the one-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the election of Abraham Lincoln to the American presidency. Immediately upon his inauguration, a militia of South Carolina soldiers besieged a garrison of federal soldiers at Fort Sumter. Lincoln besought the Carolinians to back down from this act of civil war. *Be subject to the governing authorities*, he might have said. Was that not loving? Was that not just? The rebels would not back down. Lincoln's choices were two. Surrender the fort, and admit the division of the nation into two, part slave and part free. Or fight for one nation. Use the powers of taxation, conscription, and the violent force of arms to constrain all the people, south and north, to be subject to one governing authority.

We are learning from recent historical studies how widely Lincoln was despised during that awful war. Northern Democrats here in New York City, where monied interests had grown fat from cheap southern cotton, were fed up with the interruption of commerce. They were ready to let the South be a different country, with whom trade might soon resume. But for a division within the Democratic party

over two candidates, Lincoln would not have been re-elected. He fought on. We fought on. You know the story.

About four years ago, the Smithsonian Institution was re-arranging the display of garments worn by President Lincoln on the night he was assassinated. In Lincoln's overcoat, a curator discovered an insignia never before noticed. Lincoln had had the overcoat tailored for his second inauguration, which took place just six weeks before he was murdered. Into the lining of that inaugural overcoat, Lincoln had the tailor embroider the American eagle, its talons full of warriors' arrows, and these words, "One country, one destiny." Many in his day would have called this an obsession with national union. From our perspective, looking out over a century and more of tragic racial oppression, violence, and evil, and a few decades of growing justice and love, Lincoln's fixation on "one country, one destiny" appears more than noble, but rather spiritual, and even mystic.

In his book *The American Soul*, the philosopher Jacob Needleman examines speeches of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Frederick Douglass—all of whom prized the unity of this nation in very high degree. With detail and passion like the best tour guides in the national parks, Needleman demonstrates that for each of these great leaders, the commitment to the unity of the nation had for its ground their understanding that individual human beings can develop inwardly only in concert with the outward ordering of political and civil life. In other words, for most people there will be no real access to integrity inside until and unless union and integrity outside are the whole goal of the nation's leaders. And it goes both ways for these founders, Needleman shows, for they understood that their own development as persons—as American souls—required this high dedication for national unity. Although national unity and personal integrity seem like independent possibilities, our wisest national heroes saw that they are utterly interdependent. Love and justice, wisdom and peace all express what it is to be subject to the governing authorities. ("In short, [it] provides that a public manifestation of religion may exist among Christians, and that humanity be maintained among men."¹)

The symbol and the work of the police in this city and in the cities of every reasonably well-ordered nation seem on the surface straightforward—men and women who put themselves at risk in order that the laws may be enforced. But our appreciation must go deeper. You officers probably do not ordinarily think of yourselves in service to God—and certainly your oaths of office assure that you do not think of yourselves in service to any religion. Nevertheless, if, by the "law of God" we can mean the ordering of right relatedness, both in personal and public life, then the police—yes, with sidearms and other signs of force—are one of the most significant and practical expressions of our intention to live together in right relations. Of course, we never get it right; that goes without saying. But all up and down the vertical dimension of our inner integrity—this desire to transcend our failures and to know our God—the law shows up as a sign of our seriousness to be subject to governing authorities, to be overthrown in our rebellion, and thrown under—subject—governing authority. You who wear the uniform follow the same pattern, of course, for you too are subject to governing authorities, each to his and her superior, and that one to his, right up to the throne of mayors, governors, and presidents.

Calvin again: "Accordingly, no one ought to doubt that civil authority is a calling, not only holy and lawful before God, but also the most sacred and by far the most honorable of all callings in the whole life of mortal men."²

Officers of Precinct 84, we deeply honor and appreciate your work, your vocation, your ministry. For all power is from God.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

*First Presbyterian Church
Brooklyn, New York*

© 2010 Stephen H. Phelps

¹ Institutes of the Christian Religion, IV.xx.3

² Institutes IV.xx.4