

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

1 Peter 2:11-20: "We Serve the Lord."

May 2/3, 2020 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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O Lord, Almighty God, who established and sustained all civil authority and desires us to render unto it and unto You our various dues, we humbly ask You, to bless and protect our government and all magistrates everywhere, and by this means secure peace and quietness for Your holy Word and Church, that we may daily increase in true knowledge and all godliness, and in the end obtain everlasting peace; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 173)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the second chapter of St. Peter's First Epistle. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. / Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by Him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. / Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who walks with us in our suffering and comforts us with grace and peace for the present and the promise of a perfect life after this one, dear fellow redeemed:

A month and a half ago, our state officials prohibited gatherings of more than ten people, so we stopped holding regular services. Since that time, you and I have been worshipping in our homes, and we have done what we could to stay connected through the internet, phone calls, and mail. Now our state officials have lifted restrictions in our county while still urging us to take certain precautions. So here we are back in church.

That begs the question: who is in charge of the church and of our local congregation in particular? Are we required to close our doors every time the government tells us to? This question would be easy to answer if the governing officials ordered us to stop preaching God's

Word. Then we would have to *“obey God rather than men”* (Act. 5:29) and ignore the order. But the current case is not like that. The government imposed restrictions across society to try to protect the population and keep it safe. Protecting the population is a proper function of government which Christians support.

So where exactly should the line be drawn between church and state? They can't be totally isolated and kept apart, or else you and I would have to choose one side or the other. But we are members of both. Martin Luther and others have talked about them as the *“two kingdoms.”* The church is the kingdom of God's right hand where the emphasis is on grace and forgiveness. The state is the kingdom of God's left hand where the emphasis is on law and justice. Without the kingdom of the left, we would live unhappy lives in anarchy and chaos. Without the kingdom of the right, we would live without hope and the promise of a better life after this one.

But living simultaneously in these two kingdoms can be tricky, as we have seen in the last few weeks. The Christians who first read St. Peter's First Epistle did not have it any easier. In fact, they lived at a time of severe persecution by the Roman authorities. Many Christians were killed for their faith, and if the history is accurate, Peter was martyred in Rome also. I am sure it happened that non-Christians turned in their Christian neighbors to the authorities simply because they did not like them or because they hoped to gain from their deaths.

And what advice did Peter send to these Christians *“under fire”*? He told them to suffer patiently, to be kind, and to honor the authorities. This sounds like a different Peter than the one who was so ready to use his sword in the Garden of Gethsemane. At that time Jesus told him, *“Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword”* (Mat. 26:52). Christians have the right to use their voice as citizens in our country, but we are not called to use physical violence to get our way.

Peter learned this lesson, and now he reminded the recipients of his letter that they are *“sojourners and exiles.”* They and we are not to imagine that the sinful world is our permanent place of residence. It is tempting for all of us to get more caught up in our rights as citizens than in our righteousness as saints, to pin our hopes on political activism rather than on the promises of God. We are only *“sojourners”* here; we're just passing through. Ultimately, St. Paul writes, *“our citizenship is in heaven”* (Phi. 3:20).

And that is why we can live without fear even while a new virus rages through our country and the rest of the world. We are not desperate to hang on to this life for the sake of this life. Whether it is tomorrow or next week or next year or many years from now, our death will come if Jesus does not return first. We can embrace that death when it comes because Jesus has conquered death and forced it to serve His purposes. Now death is the dark doorway that leads us into the bright and glorious realm of heaven. There we will be not *“sojourners and exiles”*; we will be permanent citizens.

But we are not in heaven yet. While we are here, we have responsibilities to our neighbors, including our neighbors in the government. Peter writes that we should submit or *“be subject... to every human institution... that by doing good [we] should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.”* We are not motivated like so many others are by power or money or fame. Those are

earthly things that cannot last. The whole world is caught up in the pursuit of these empty things.

What we have is far better. We have righteousness, redemption, and salvation. We have forgiveness, hopefulness, and life. We have freedom in Christ—freedom from our sin, freedom from the curse of the law, freedom from death. What are the fleeting things of the world compared to these eternal things? Christ has broken us free from these chains. So Peter urges us to “[live] as people who are free.”

But how can he say at the same time “live in freedom” and “submit to the authorities”? It is because both things—heavenly freedom and earthly authority—come from the same source. Peter writes, “Be subject *for the Lord’s sake* to every human institution,” “[live] *as servants of God*,” be subject to masters while being “*mindful of God*.” We submit to our authorities not because we fear, love, and trust in them above all things, but because we fear, love, and trust in God. We recognize that He has established the earthly authorities. As Jesus told Pontius Pilate, “*You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above*” (Joh. 19:11).

But what happens when the authorities behave badly, and instead of punishing the evil and praising the good, they do the opposite? Then they have clearly abused the power God has granted them, like when they persecuted and killed those early Christians. And while it is proper to point out corruption and sin even when committed by ruling officials, yet they are still to be respected and honored—not for their own sake but “*for the Lord’s sake*.” Our eyes are always on Him. Good rulers and bad rulers come and go, but “*The LORD of hosts is with us*” (Psa. 46:11), and He isn’t going anywhere.

It is so easy to forget this. We forget that the Lord reigns, that He is in control. We are often looking and hoping for a perfect leader on earth, a new “messiah,” who will set everything right. Or we let a bad ruler shake our faith in the providence of God. We are so quickly caught up in these “*passions of the flesh, which wage war against [our souls]*.” We don’t want to take the humble path. We don’t want to face trouble. We don’t want to suffer. We want things to go our way and on our timeline.

Our pride and selfishness are exactly the reasons God needs to humble us. This is why He lets trials and hardships come our way. He wants us to remember that He is the Lord, and there is none like Him. The unbelieving world in the midst of a crisis may put its total confidence in human ingenuity, medicine, or financial security. But these are temporary solutions that cannot save us. At best, they can only push off the inevitable.

Only the Lord can save, and He does save. Like you, I don’t know what the future will look like. I don’t know what illnesses, injuries, or hardships may come to us or to the people we love. I don’t know how many days the Lord has numbered for us, whether many or few. But I do know this: Jesus Christ, true God and true Man, has redeemed us with His holy, precious blood, and with His innocent suffering and death. He took the humble path. He willingly faced trouble and anguish. He obeyed His Father’s will all the way to the point of His death.

He did this so that we would have forgiveness of all our sins, no matter what stains are on our past. He did this so we would have strength to face our trials knowing that He understands our

suffering. He did this so we would have life whenever our present troubles come to an end. Jesus' death accomplished all these things, and His resurrection assures us that these blessings are ours. We do not follow a leader who had the ability to inspire but couldn't deliver on his promises. We follow the Lord Jesus who is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.

This is why we freely submit to those in authority over us *"with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust."* We do this out of love for the Lord, who has commanded us to behave in this way. We don't know how He will use our humble example and honorable conduct. Perhaps it is to draw others, including government officials, to His saving grace so that they will join us in glorifying God on the day of Christ's return.

So in all things and at all times, **We Serve the Lord**. We take up our crosses daily and follow Him (Luk. 9:23). We go about our work *"heartily, as for the Lord and not for men"* (Col. 3:23). And we take comfort that it is He who keeps us safe. It is He who blesses our work. It is He who holds our present and our future. It is He who saves us and will take us to be with Him in His heavenly kingdom.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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