

September 6, 2020 – Romans 13:1-10

I was watching a movie recently that struck a chord with me. I won't say what movie it was because it was just a little too violent to be endorsing from the pulpit. So let's just say, it was a war movie and leave it at that.

This war movie centered around the actions of a Marine staff sergeant nearing retirement. This sergeant had decades of experience, years in combat situations, a lifetime of practical military expertise. He could have easily commanded an entire army. But he was just a staff sergeant. Because he in reality, he was also an enlisted man. And staff sergeant was just about the highest rank he would ever achieve.

But a few days before he retires, there's an attack. And immediately, he's assigned to a new platoon. And this new platoon is commanded by a child. OK, he's not really a child. But he is green. A young second lieutenant without a day of combat experience in his life.

So the staff sergeant finds him. And walks up to him. And he... salutes him. And says, "Reporting for duty, sir." And, "What are your orders, sir?" Because, despite the disparity of experience between the two men, the lieutenant is in charge, and the sergeant will follow his orders, no matter what. That's how the chain of command works in the military.

As I said, this scene really struck me. Because it reminded me a lot of what pastors experience when we leave the seminary. We are not the wise, experienced sergeants in this analogy. No, we are the utterly green, inexperienced second lieutenant. And we enter churches that are full of men and women with more experience than us.

Men and women who know more about the town that we're moving to. Who know more about the membership of the church we're entering. Who know more about the resources available to us for ministry. And yet, despite all of that, men and women who call us "Pastor" and look to us for leadership. I've often joked that the pastoral ministry is the one career in the entire world where entry level is also upper management.

It's a baffling arrangement. A situation that no one would consider ideal, if it weren't for the fact that the Bible tells us that it should be this way. And if it weren't for the fact that for the past 2000 years, give or take, it's worked pretty well, all things considered.

But maybe that shouldn't surprise us. Because the Bible is full of hierarchies. Chains of command for the benefit of God's people. We see it over and over again. From the very beginning, in fact. God instructs Adam. Adam instructs Eve. Adam and Eve together instruct God's creation, including their own children.

We see it elsewhere in the Old Testament too. God commands Moses. Moses commands Aaron. Aaron commands the elders. The elders command the people. We see it in the monarchy of Israel. God delivers a message to a prophet. The prophet delivers that message to the king. The king delivers that message to the people.

We see it in the Gospels too. God send Jesus to the disciples. Jesus sends the disciples to Jesus' followers. The disciples send Jesus' followers to the people. And this continues in the early church. God gives his Spirit to the Apostles. The Apostles give God's Spirit to the deacons. The deacons give God's Spirit to the people.

And we see right here in our Epistle lesson. God gives authority to governments. Governments exercise authority over citizens. citizens exercise authority over other citizens. It's the way that God set things up to be.

And it makes a lot of sense when you think about it. Because hierarchies do a wonderful job of making sure nothing falls through the cracks. Of making sure everything gets taken care of the way it needs to be.

And when that doesn't happen, when there's someone to blame, hierarchies ensure that there's someone to take responsibility for the problem. As Truman once said about the Presidency, the buck stops here. It can't be passed any further up the chain.

The same is true of churches. When you called me as your pastor – over 4 years ago now – you handed me a lot of authority. But you also handed me a lot of responsibility. Because ultimately, if something goes very wrong in this congregation, the buck stops right here. And I take that responsibility very seriously.

That's true of every system of authority. We have a God of order. Who takes chaos and forms it into creation. Who takes wilderness and forms it into paradise. Who takes death and forms it into life. And He has ordered the world for our good. So that we may have life.

And yet, that raises a troubling question for us. Because, as we look around this world, there's an awful lot we see wrong with it. There's a lot of chaos. A lot of bleakness. A lot of death.

We see police officers commit horrible acts of violence against the very people they are called to serve and protect. We see rioters commit horrible acts of violence against the very people that they call their neighbors. We see creation itself in such rebellion that a virus 5 millionths of an inch in diameter, one of the smallest living things in God's entire creation, is now the cause of death for almost 900,000 people worldwide.

That doesn't sound very much like order. That doesn't sound very much like the chain of command operating as it should. That doesn't sound very much like anybody has taken responsibility for the state the world is in.

And yet our Epistle tells us, *“There is no authority except that which God has established.”* So if God sets this world up with hierarchies, and he's at the top of all of these chains of command, shouldn't the buck stop with Him? Shouldn't He be responsible for cleaning up this mess? So where is He? Why hasn't He done anything about it?

That's how a lot of the world looks at things. There are many people who, for that exact reason, have trouble believing that there is a good, all-powerful, all-knowing God. And frankly, there's a certain amount of logic to it.

Yet, it fails to really look at the root of the problem. The reason for all this pain and sin and death. For that you have to look at the very beginning, where it all began:

*“The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’ You will not certainly die,’ the serpent said to the woman. ‘For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’”*

The problem with blaming God for not taking authority over the mess that this world has become, is that this world is in the mess it's in because we tried to take that authority from God. We wanted to be like God, knowing good and evil. We wanted to be at the top of the chain of command. We didn't want to have anyone in authority over us.

And we still don't. We still sit here as judges of good and evil. We still sit in judgment over our neighbor's sinfulness, while ignoring our own. We still sit in judgment over our brothers and sisters in Christ, seeking to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, while refusing to humble ourselves like the children in our pews. We still sit in judgement over the failings of our governing authorities, while ignoring our own disobedience.

We judge and we judge and we judge. And, occasionally, when we run out of people to judge, we look at God and we judge Him too. We become the biggest hypocrites on the planet. We reject God's authority over us and then blame Him for not taking authority over us.

And for a long time, God let us wallow in our sinfulness. "If you wanna take authority over this world, if you wanna be in charge of ordering this chaos, if you want to be in charge of judging good and evil, that's fine, you go right ahead and try. Be your own little gods and try to do My job."

Of course, it didn't work. It couldn't work. Because we are not gods. And we never will be gods. And the more we try, the more sinful and corrupt and totally ruined this world becomes.

But then, God had compassion on us. God stepped in anyway. And he said, "Alright, even as you're rejecting my Word to you, I will send my Word made flesh to you. Even as you're rejecting my love for you, I will demonstrate my love to you. Even as you're rejecting my life for you, I will give my life for you."

And he sent his Son. Who took authority over mankind in a way that no one expected and no one understood. He took authority over us by becoming a human and sacrificing his life on a cross. He took authority over everything by giving up everything for us.

And now he gives us that life. Not because we suddenly respect the chain of command and find a way to put him first in our lives, though we should certainly still strive to do that. No, he gives that life to us because he is our God and we are His people. And no matter how much we reject it, that fact will never change. Amen.