

AMERICAN IDOLS – PART 3

TEXT: Romans 13:1-10

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on August 21, 2022

Church and State

Full disclosure: I have long hated that passage from Romans, mostly due to the way it has been politicized. When I objected to the Iraq war and to torture as formal US policy during the George Bush years, my objections were met with “Romans 13!! Romans 13!!” When Obama was elected, those same people were screaming he was the antichrist. Uh, Romans 13? Crickets. Trump gets elected and it’s “Can’t criticize! Romans 13!” Biden is elected and those same people can’t even acknowledge he won.

The cries of “Romans 13! Romans 13!” sound to my ears much like the cries from the Ephesian theater of “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” A distraction from the real issue and a fomenting of confusion and rage to protect hidden interests. It’s also a gross misunderstanding of the passage. I’m going to come back to it, but I don’t want to start there.

I do want to start back in Ephesus, where we left off last week, after the town clerk managed to calm the hostile crowd rioting in the theater by pointing out that Artemis, the goddess of the city, was not under threat at all. It was just a business concern from the local artisans who had other, peaceful means of addressing any issues they had and everyone should just go home. Which they did. Acts 19.

I mentioned last week that the approach to evangelism of Paul and the other apostles was not one of conquest. The town clerk in Ephesus spoke the truth to the crowd. Paul had not been defaming Artemis, trying to tear down her temple, or otherwise forcing people to become followers of Jesus. Enough believed Paul’s message that he was able to establish a church in Ephesus, but those who stuck with Artemis were not persecuted in any way by those in the church. When the Goths raided the city a couple of centuries later, in the year 268, they burned the Temple of Artemis to the ground, but it appears that the worship of Artemis outlasted that final destruction of her famous temple.

By the year 431, however, Ephesus was so entirely Christian that the Third Ecumenical Council of the church was held there. Artemis who? Not a worshipper in sight. How did that happen? Sadly, it happened by force, through persecution of pagan worshippers not only in Ephesus but throughout the ancient world. And who did that? The Roman Emperor Constantine and his successors, following Constantine’s conversion to Christianity in the year 312 and his establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the empire.

Constantine’s conversion was good for Christians in the moment. He actually rebuilt a good portion of Ephesus. Before him, the Roman Empire had been tolerant of other religions as long as one of the gods they worshipped was Caesar himself. That landed Jews, and eventually Christians, in the crosshairs because they would only acknowledge one God, who was very definitely not Caesar. The persecution of Jews and Christians was horrific and relentless.

It was only after Constantine that the early Christians could worship in public and, with state sponsorship, thus began a golden age of cathedrals and art, education and music. It also gave the church access to political power, patronage, wealth, and control of armies. That access to unchecked power opened the doors of the new cathedrals to every established idol of the time and provided the military power to protect them. And thus began a dark age of Christian violence and oppression.

Almost instantly, “love your enemies” was translated into the purge of pagan worshippers across the realm and the horrors of the Crusades. If there were any worshippers of Artemis left in Ephesus after that, they were in hiding and dared not speak her name for fear of their lives. While not persecuting Jews as directly, Constantine laid the systemic groundwork for Christian antisemitism by blaming the Jews for the death of Jesus and

passing laws that forbid Jews and Christians to intermarry and mandating the death penalty for Christians who converted to Judaism. It didn't take long for that to grow into the violence of pogroms, the Holocaust, and the antisemitism slaughtering Jews in this country today in the Tree of Life Synagogue massacre and others.

Much of my time at the helm of the Massachusetts Bible Society was taking the incoming from those who hate the church. For every example I had of a St. Francis, Mother Teresa, Oscar Romero, and Martin Luther King, Jr.—not to mention Jesus—they could counter with the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and the Salem Witch trials—which was only a smaller version of the persecution of supposed witches in Europe, where the victims—mostly women healers—are estimated to number anywhere from 10,000 to nine million across the three centuries from 1450 to 1750.

And then there's all the bloodshed between Protestants and Catholics, and then Protestants and other Protestants. Many will point out that it's not just Christians. Every religion has a history of brutal and repressive violence, which is evident not only historically but up to and including our world today. I read more than one philosopher and theologian in seminary who came to believe that religious brutality and violence was so widespread across time, culture, and religion that it had to be part of the nature of religion itself, no matter the creed.

Certainly, human cruelty and violence don't need the excuse of religion to justify themselves. Plenty of non-religious people commit atrocities. But here's how I see it.

The thing that moves us from individual murder to genocide is its scale; and to scale our worst impulses requires structure, planning, and collaboration. It becomes a collective effort. Last week we looked at the impact of the lies of *individuals* trying to protect the idols of their personal power or wealth turned into the *corporate* deception discovered in the tobacco and fossil fuel industries. Lies at scale threaten us at scale and those threats must be addressed at scale.

The idols allowed to run amok within individual companies, gradually took over industries, which then found ways to corrupt the thing that was supposed to keep the larger industries in check—the government. Once the government is under the sway of one or more idols, it doesn't take long to take over two other major threats to consolidated power: education and the press. At the governmental level—whether local, state, or federal—idolatry becomes systemic. It is built into the institutions of government itself. Then the horrors can be largely removed from view as most participants don't have to commit the acts, they just need to sign the papers or keep quiet. And it's all perfectly legal, right? I'm just following orders.

With control of industry, education, the press and all branches of government, there remains only one institution with the scale, influence, and independence to stop the abuse of power: Religion. Which is why every idol that has managed to capture a government will sacrifice just about anything, including large portions of its population, to merge itself with the power of the majority religion of the area. It's the Divine Right of Kings for a modern age.

The joining of the power of religion to the power of government is the ballgame. Not a thing remains with the authority and scale to stop it from becoming drunk on its own power.

The closer church and state are to each other, the worse the corruption and abuse. Join them together to form a state religion, so that one particular kind of belief is also the law of the land with the state's enforcement mechanisms behind it, and abuse will become atrocity. The proof of that is written in history. All the atrocities I've mentioned happened during periods when a state or nation established one particular religion as the law of the land. It doesn't matter if it's Sharia law in Afghanistan or Puritan Christianity in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The merger of religion and government brings the same, ugly, violent result.

We talk a lot about checks and balances within government, but to my mind one of the most important of the checks and balances in any nation is the absolute independence of religion and government; each with the authority to critique and hold the other accountable. That is what James Madison was trying to preserve in crafting the establishment clause in the first amendment to the Constitution, and that separation is what I think

Paul was talking about in Romans 13. Paul is saying that the rule of law is, in principle, ordained by God and that those professing faith in Jesus should follow Jesus' example by placing themselves *under* its authority in this life.

Does Paul paint too idealistic a picture of how state agents wield their power in Romans 13? I believe he does. But give the guy a break. He's writing a letter that will be hand delivered and read aloud to the leaders of the church...IN ROME. And the reason he's writing to the church in Rome is to get their support for a mission he wants to undertake to Spain. So there's a political as well as a religious purpose behind the book of Romans.

Paul is a Roman citizen. He's zealous for the cause of Christ, but he doesn't want to be in more trouble than he needs to be. He will give the Roman authorities every benefit of the doubt in this public document, while taking great pains to point out that he is not coming to Rome to stir up the church to overthrow Caesar. Nope. This movement is not about that. I think Romans 13 is him saying, Rome, if you're listening, we take great pains to stay within and respect the law of the land. That is how God wants us to behave. We're not any threat to you Caesar. Live and let live. We are not seeking political power.

Within the bounds of Romans 13, can you call out corruption? Absolutely. Jesus did that. Can you disrupt business as a form of protest? Absolutely. Jesus did that. Can you spend your days trying to convince others of the truth as you understand it? Absolutely. Jesus did that. Can you rile up a mob to violently overthrow the government? No. Can you break the law and expect special treatment because of your beliefs? No. Can you refuse to pay taxes and get away with it? No. Jesus may have gotten the money for his taxes out of the mouth of a fish, but he paid them.

Yes, there are times when the law of the land violates the law of God. It's plain in Paul's own life as well as the lives of the other apostles that believers are to follow their conscience at such times. But following your conscience is never equated with forcing *others* to follow your conscience. Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 10 that if they are not welcomed in a particular place that they should shake the dust off their sandals and move on. In that same chapter he even warns them of coming persecution with the suggestion that they be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves." If they are persecuted in one town, they should flee to the next; not burn it to the ground and salt the earth. Not take it over and make themselves magistrates and judges. Not fight to the death to try to force conversions. Just. Move. On.

If the early followers of Jesus refused to follow the law, even when they believed it was to follow a higher calling, they accepted the civil consequences. When a government position might have duties that contradicted their beliefs, they did not seek office. They believed in non-violence so they would not serve in the military. They objected to what was being taught in pagan schools so they refused to be teachers. They objected to charging interest, so they did not take jobs as money lenders. All of that meant financial hardship for many; it was a sacrifice for their faith they willingly made.

Imagine if a Christian working as a mortgage lender at Bank of America just decided to set all the interest rates for her clients at zero because charging interest violated her religious beliefs. Would she have a job long? Would it be a big debate with a case that went all the way to the Supreme Court? Even in this crazy world, I don't think so. People would say, "If you don't believe in charging interest, don't get a job in a bank." And, yet, a pharmacist can refuse to sell legal contraception to a customer. A doctor can refuse to perform legal, life-saving treatment. Textbooks can be rewritten to eliminate factual references to things some find offensive. Books can be removed from libraries or even publishers for all because of the religious objections of some.

Those things are not the order Paul laid out in Romans 13. In Romans 13, Christians submit to the government; they don't subvert it or force their beliefs on their neighbors. That fails the law of love in verses 8-10. Does your job violate your conscience but not the civil law? Take up a different profession. Does following the civil law violate your religious principles? Protest it peacefully and accept the consequences. Speak out and try to change hearts and minds. The way of Jesus is the way of love, not the way of force. It properly operates through stories and questions, not edicts and inquisitions.

When Christianity seeks to enforce its beliefs through the power of the government; that's a sign that the God made manifest in Jesus has been displaced. An idol is at work and likely embedded in the institutions of government or seeking to be so. Established religion in government is malware in the system and will ultimately betray and destroy those living under its rule. God is Love and Love is fundamentally altered if it is not freely chosen. If you're trying to force Love with military might or law enforcement, Love has already left the building.

Some states are moving quickly down the road to turn their interpretation of Christian faith into civil law. Many are on the ballot in November in the hopes of making the United States formally a "Christian Nation." No doubt many believe their cause is righteous. They always have. As the violent fruit of those efforts have proven, they were—and are—mistaken. How do we keep them separate? Next week. Same time, same station. Amen.