

“Better Call Saul”  
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church  
Acts 9:1-20  
Romans 13:1-10  
June 17, 2018  
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Some people feel that preachers should steer clear of politics. Others — and this is the school of thought I claim as my *alma mater* — feel that (to paraphrase 20th Century theologian Karl Barth) you’ve got to preach with the Bible in one hand and an iPad with a dozen news site tabs opened in the other. I’ll admit that over the past year and a half, even I’ve grown weary of talking about all the chaos and un-Christ-like behavior coming out of Washington.

But, late this past week, Washington — in the form of Attorney-General and former Alabama Senator Jefferson Beauregard Sessions — decided to have a go at Biblical interpretation. Any preacher worth their salt has had to wrestle with a response, because Mr. Sessions has stepped onto our turf and, I’m afraid to say, failed miserably at understanding, interpreting, teaching, and proclaiming the witness to the good news of Jesus Christ found in the New Testament. I say that he failed because history tells us that the alternative is much more sinister.

In these two texts from the Christian scriptures we hear the story of Saul’s conversion and then the same man’s reflections, years later, in the letter to the Romans that Mr. Sessions referenced.

The Attorney-General was talking about the crackdown on the illegal entry of immigrants which has led, over the course of six weeks in April and May, to the separation of 1,995 minors from their families.<sup>1</sup> While this practice has been heavily criticized by religious and human rights groups, when it comes to turning away immigrants and arresting and detaining them and taking their children from them, you *can* make a coherent, rational, and political argument for it.

You just can’t make one based on Christianity.

Or Judaism. Or the texts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Putting Romans 13 aside for a moment, the overwhelming witness of scripture speaks of welcome and care for the stranger, the alien, the immigrant.

The books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy — none known for being particularly touch-feely — all remind the people of Israel again and again to show hospitality, to not oppress, to care for and to love strangers in their midst, because they were strangers in Egypt and they were treated harshly and that was against God’s way. The people need to be reminded repeatedly because it is so easy to forget that nearly all of us have in our family trees someone who was either forced from home or left in search of a better life somewhere else.

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<sup>1</sup> Associated Press story at <https://apnews.com/3361a7d5fa714ea4b028f0a29db1cab>

If we look for help from Jesus in justifying harsh treatment of immigrants, we're out of luck. Jesus, who crossed into foreign lands himself, who sought out those that the law shunned, who really hits us hard when we ask "Who is my neighbor?" by telling stories about outsiders and pushing us to radically enlarge our circles.

So a Christian seeking biblical evidence for tearing children from their parents' arms has to scour the Pauline letters, and then take words out of context, and then twist them. Mr. Sessions highlighted the first verse of the chapter: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God." Paul, more than anyone, knows the stories of resistance to unjust laws throughout scripture. He knows of people resisting pharaohs and kings in the name of the people of God. Paul himself writes to the Philippians from jail, where he found himself after defying the authorities!<sup>2</sup>

Scholars have wondered about this passage for a long time. Some argue that Paul was telling Christians to keep their heads down so as not to provoke the emperor. If you read the rest of the chapter, and the chapter before it, and the whole of Paul's work, you see that his whole message hinges on authority being legitimate and responsive to God's will. And, even more, it has to fit into the context of love. Mr. Sessions did not speak to the words that appear nine verses later: "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

The Attorney-General has engaged a text that has a fascinating history over the past three hundred years. Back during the time of the Thirteen Colonies, some preachers used this text to tell their congregations that they needed to remain loyal, royal subjects forever and ever and ever...that independence from the British was against God's will. Less than a century later, Southern preachers admonished abolitionists for disobeying the Fugitive Slave Act with Romans 13. It was a text used by the Nazi party in Germany and to argue for apartheid in South Africa. Pulling this verse out and declaring that it is a directive to submit to any and all laws is grade-A scriptural malpractice.

There's a fairly simple way to know if you're using Romans 13:1 properly. Simply ask yourself this: Am I the one with the authority, telling someone in a weaker position that God wants them respect my power? If so, you're almost certainly not preaching the gospel.

Speaking of oppressing the vulnerable, the Damascus road story is not the first time that Saul appears in the book of Acts. Two chapters earlier, he was seen egging on the crowd who killed a follower of Jesus named Stephen. But here's the thing: from Saul's perspective, he was an upstanding defender of the faith.

I'm a sucker for *The Walking Dead* — that television show about a world overrun by zombies. In the very cynical worldview of this zombie dystopia, we follow our heroes as they move from place to place, trying to survive, and encountering new villains and their followers, as "our" group discovers that humans are more of a threat than the infected. Many fans of this show — and shows like it — have

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<sup>2</sup> With thanks to the Rev. Mamie Broadhurst for this insight.

pointed out that if we can see the story from the perspective of some of the “evil” groups, it’s our heroes that are the problem, rampaging through the countryside and destroying communities that were functioning before they showed up.

To the Christians of the region, Saul was a baddie — he was just like the villain leaders on *The Walking Dead*. Stories were told about Saul’s penchant for violence and the news had spread that he was heading to Damascus with authority to round up and arrest lawbreakers — bringing a reckoning for those who spoke the name of Christ.

God intervenes here in one of God’s more weird and wild ways. God does not smite Saul or leave him in anguish, wallowing in freakish misery. God did not simply flip a switch and turn Saul from a bad guy into a good guy, like a professional wrestler turning from heel to face in the middle of a match. Saul doesn’t get to simply see the light and hear Jesus say, “Hey, it’s all good, man.”

Instead, Saul hears the voice of Jesus, and he is struck blind, and he becomes incredibly vulnerable himself. His traveling companions have to lead him to a house in Damascus, where he sits for three days.

This is not simply the story of God calling Saul. It is the story of God calling Ananais to widen the circle of the fellowship of Christ by going to encounter and help the last dude Ananais wanted to encounter and help. He goes and he prays and Saul sees — really sees! — and the Gospel spreads to our Gentile ancestors and we have 1 Corinthians and Philipians and Galatians and the aching love of the letter to the Romans.

God has transformed the most bitter of enemies into beloved siblings.<sup>3</sup> That is the miracle of the call of Saul. When I look into my own heart and wonder with whom I need that kind of reconciliation, I don’t think of powerful people like Attorneys-General. I actually think of someone who is quite powerless. Saul grew up in Tarsus, which was a cosmopolitan city. You might think this would make him fairly open-minded. Instead, he became a zealot and when these Christians popped-up, he was determined to snuff them out.

I have an uncle who lives within the borders of New York City — the most diverse, cosmopolitan place I can think of. And yet he boils with anger at the persistent existence of anyone who does not look like him, act like him, and think like him who might have the temerity to try to make a life in these United States. He’s that guy who spews vile racism and homophobia and sexism into the internet. He is the face of your standard al.com troll. A few months ago, I expressed on Facebook my concerns about the President’s plans for people living here under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy. My uncle let loose with a slew of filthy words, strong suggestions of how I might spend my spare time, and the declaration that I ought to change my name, as I was dishonoring the family.

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<sup>3</sup> Will Willimon, Acts, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1988), 79.

Happily for me, the cavalry rode in — family members, church members, and friends — and they did the most remarkable thing. They didn't engage my uncle. They didn't argue about the politics. They simply expressed joy at knowing me and laughed at how hard it is to have people like that in your family. He was looking for a fight, and he didn't get one, and he disabled his Facebook account and crawled back into his cave of fear and anger.

My uncle is not Saul — he has no such power nor a claim of faithfulness to anything beyond his own self-interest. I expect I might just go the rest of his life without ever having to deal with him at all. But if the witness of scripture is true, there's the tiniest chance that his heart will someday open to grace. I have no plans to reach out to him — it's not smart or safe or necessary — but I want to create the kind of church that could respond as Ananais did if the call ever did come that my uncle was to be used as an instrument for divine purpose. If the scales ever fall from his eyes, I want him to see the church, hard at work, seeking reconciliation and advocating for the vulnerable and showing hospitality to immigrants and fulfilling God's law in love.

I believe that such a church is called to speak up when our holy Word is used for violence. Not in the name of Christ shall children be harmed.

Such a church seeks to encounter those we don't understand and to forever expand our worldview and never to restrain the circle of Christ's love.

Such a church allows none of its wandering flock to struggle alone.

Such a church asks nobody to deny their identity and none to live in fear.

Such a church stands with the powerless and gives voice to the ignored.

Such a church scans the horizon, unplugs its ears, and turns on all the notifications waiting to discover whoever God will send us to love next.

In the name of Jesus the crosser of boundaries, the breaker of bread with sinners,  
the Christ —  
the Resurrection and the Life, Amen.