Sermon **Amos 8.4-7**
September 22, 2019 **Psalm 113**
Proper 20C **1 Timothy 2.1-7**
The Rev. Gary R. Brower, PhD **Luke 16.1-13**

One of the sermon-preparation websites I read every so often said of this morning's lessons: "If you're looking for a good time from the pulpit, you may want to stay home this Sunday or opt out of preaching" (https://tinyurl.com/yyg5tav9). I must admit, reading (or listening to) this morning's readings, has me agreeing with that suggestion. The problem, however, neither of those options was open to me!

Forging ahead, then, I'll take my lead from the reading from 1 Timothy, specifically the first few verses: "First of all . . . I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity" (2.1-2). Depending on your political leanings (and/or who's in office), these verses either are avoided like the plague, or embraced with vigor. And, "therein lies the rub". I think many of us recognize that passages of Scripture can be used in wildly differing ways. One example (to use Bp. Kym's reference to "confirmation bias") is the letter to Philemon, on which I preached a few weeks ago. In pre-Civil War America, some saw the book as legitimating slavery; abolitionists, on the other hand, saw it as condemning the practice. But, as we enter a contentious election season, with religious assertions of God's favor coming from both sides of the aisle, what I see in 1 Timothy is a prime example of our own dis-ease with the relations between Christianity, or any religion, and government.

Our twenty-first century conundrum has its roots almost three thousand years ago. You'll recall that a loose confederation of tribes, descended from one man in covenant with God—Jacob—journeyed to Egypt to escape a famine in Canaan. Eventually, another man of God's choosing—Moses—arose and led them out of Egypt . . . into a wilderness. Surviving their wanderings, they finally entered the promised land, led by tribal leaders and other God-appointed leaders known as "judges". The judges merely mediated God's will; their true ruler was God.

But, during the judge-ship of Samuel, the people believed that they would be better served by "kings" — just like everyone around them. Such a king, they believed would lead them in battle, and help them gain in stature. Samuel, you may remember, saw both the fear and lack of faith reflected in such a desire: "the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." [And] Samuel prayed to the LORD" (1 Sam 8.6). God's response to Samuel's prayer was: "Listen to

the voice of the people . . . they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them . . . you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them" (7-8). And Samuel told them:

> These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take . . . the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day." But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles (1 Sam 8.10-20).

Not to put too fine a point on it, Israel was afraid, forging a future we've inherited.

Israel and Judah's subsequent history was a succession of good kings and bad kings (mostly the latter) . . . "good" or "bad" defined as whether or not they were faithful to the covenant. The books of 1st & 2nd Kings, and 1st & 2nd Chronicles, as well as many of the prophetic books, tell about those kings and the nature of their reigns. For example, the reading from Amos this morning is set within the context of the corrupt reign of Jeroboam, with leadership that paid lip service to the law while exploiting loopholes to oppress the poor and helpless—a reminder that "legality", even "religious legality"—and "morality" are not the same thing.

Partially as a result of "bad" kings (at least from the standpoint of the biblical writers), the northern nation of Israel found itself overrun and scattered by the Assyrians. Decades later, the southern nation of Judah was, similarly conquered by the Babylonians and taken into exile. While in Babylon, however, the prophet Jeremiah promoted a slight shift in attitudes towards—even a hostile—government. Jeremiah wrote:

> Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (29.5-7).

Act in support of, and pray for, a hostile government?! Why? Because if it is successful, all of the people will be successful, including the exiles. The ties between God-faithful people and governments become really muddy!

After the return from exile, the relationship between God's people and the ruling forces see-sawed back and forth. Judah fell under the rule of the Greeks until the Maccabean revolt. Under the Maccabees/Hasmoneans, then, a hundred years of a virtual theocracy; the high priests running the country. That, of course, ended with the Romans invading and taking the land from the Maccabees. Under Roman over-lord-ship, there was also a semblance of local "secular" rule that, sometimes, worked with the High Priest and Sanhedrin (think of Herod); a double "secular" rule, combined with religious rule. And it was into that context that Jesus was born.

Jesus' life and teachings represent a departure from the "new-normal", if confusing, relationship between God and government. Jesus pointed out the problems with local rule, but he never advocated overthrowing it. He agreed that taxes should be paid to Caesar. But he didn't temper his critique when it ran afoul of either the "religious" or the "secular" leadership. He announced a coming "kingdom of God" where ethics, personal and public, were to be lived out "on earth, as in heaven". And, because of those teachings, he became a victim of legal systems—secular in league with religious—that didn't allow for that kind of dissent.

After Jesus' death, his followers were frightened that their association with him might lead them into conflict with the governments, both religious and secular. Yet, citizenship in the kingdom of God demanded that Jesus' followers assert that "Jesus is Lord", directly defying any claims Caesar might demand. That is about as anti-governmental as you can get! Indeed, government workers and soldiers, according to some Christian leaders, couldn't be baptized until they left their jobs so that their loyalties would be clearly delineated.

But, in spite of the demands of "alternate citizenship", Christianity spread, both among the marginalized, as well as among the more well-to-do. And, as the

expected second-coming didn't happen, Christians had to learn how to live amongst non-Christians. One of the "tactics" they adopted is reflected in our reading from 1 Timothy (and hearkens back to Jeremiah): "don't draw attention to yourself, and pray/work for a peaceful society". Such a tactic worked—some of the time—unless an Emperor arose who demanded that ALL claim HIM as "Lord" and offer a pinch of incense to prove it. Then it became a time simply to keep one's head down!

That all changed with the Emperor Constantine, and his adoption of Christianity, and his declaration that it become the religion of the Empire. The die was cast, the results of which we live today. Secular government and the Christian God became intertwined, hopelessly entangled; many (if not most) scholars and historians say that that was the end of the "Jesus movement". Western nations allied with their own state "church", and those who disagreed with that church's teaching found themselves afoul of the state as well. Disagreement might mean death, and many chose to flee the church/state . . . including the ancestors of some of us here.

Our national forebears sought to eliminate that toxic mixture of religion and government. Our founders knew that such interweaving wasn't good for either institution. But, over time, and especially in the last half-century or so, what the founders advocated has been eroded. And, now, we find ourselves in the position of debating whether or not it is good to pray for the government. And, to what end?

Clearly the biblical writers had to address this; they didn't shy away. But their contexts were different. And history has shown us that, while church/state relations have changed, they reflect one of several options, dependent upon how God's people interacted with the powers-that-be:

1. Was the government instituted by God? One could argue this was the case with the Jews.
2. Did the government adopt a Christianity as its own (and for its own purposes), *a la* Constantine and later European states?
3. Was Christianity one-among-many religions, trying to live peaceably with a government, *a la* late- and post-New Testament Christianity?

I, personally, believe that we 21st-century's Christians ought to adopt the third option, one-among-many religious groups in a pluralistic society—perhaps in a society much like our founders envisioned. If that's the case, then our baptismal claim that "Jesus is Lord" might define the relationship anew, to the betterment of all. In that context, praying for the government might take on a different meaning: as the saying goes: "Pray as if it all depended on God; work as if all depended on you."

Amen.