

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

January 25, 2009

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Hope . . . and Judgment

Romans 13: 1-2; 6-9

A few weeks ago, as part of the transition process, President Bush hosted all of the former presidents and president-elect Obama at the White House. As these men met the press President Bush graciously said to his successor, "One message that I have, and I think we all share, is that we want you to succeed. Whether we're Democrat or Republican, we care deeply about this country." As our nation begins a new presidential administration, all of us, regardless of our political persuasion, add our assent to President Bush's gracious affirmation. The problems that beset our country are so grave, our challenges are so severe, the suffering of our people so profound and widespread, that all people of goodwill are summoned to support our public officials as they seek solutions that create a more harmonious, just and workable society. President Obama ran on a platform of hope, and we as Christians must resonate with that theme, because as Christ's representatives we are called to be people of hope, which is to say, we are meant to be a people who trust our Creator and Sustainer to provide us with resources sufficient to imagine and implement a future that others cannot see. As people of hope we trust God to empower us to create redemptive ways where others see no way.

There is nothing specifically political about what I am saying. A certain loyalty to one's government and a certain commitment to one's culture is a constituent element of genuine faith. We often think of the early Christians' relationship to the Roman government as one of unmitigated enmity, but Paul's own words reminded the Christians of his day that they had a responsibility to be involved in the culture in which they lived and to give the government that ruled them a measure of support. "Let everyone be subject to the government authorities, for there is no authority except from God." There is a divine sanction for government. It has its place. Paul sees the political realm as playing a role in ensuring the health of human society. He says, "Pay every realm of government what is due it, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due."

We wish success to this political administration as it faces formidable challenges, and we pledge ourselves to be part of the solution in finding answers to difficult issues. It is part of our responsibility as a people of God to transform the society in which we live and help create a healthier world. We are called to this task by our role as a people of love.

Yet, our support for government, any government, is dialectical -- that is to say, it involves a Yes and a No. The Biblical injunction in Romans 13 to support the government is balanced by the words of Revelation 13 which sees government as a beast that must be resisted. That, too, is a part of our faith heritage. Even as we are called to be positive instruments within our culture, we are also called to stand in judgment against it. In truth, as Christians we are citizens of two realms. We are citizens of our community, our city, our county, our state, our nation and our world. That is one realm. We are also citizens of God's invisible kingdom and are subject to its call and responsibilities.

We are to view the activities of any earthly government through the prism of the values of God's Kingdom. Where the activities of government contradict the claims and call of God, we are under obligation to stand over against that government. Even as we are called to share the hope that this new administration exudes, we are also called to stand over against it with a certain independence and wariness. Regardless of our political affiliation, all of us are to understand that no president is God's president, no political party is God's party, no political program is ever to be seen as God's program, for invariably those programs are administered by fallible human beings, so that, however high these politicians' ambitions, however pure their intentions, their execution is always flawed and the consequences of their action are often tragic.

Let us never forget that political good is often at odds with spiritual good, even when political good garbs itself in religious terms.

As we gather around our Lord's table this day, let us remember that our Lord was put to death under the political axiom that it is good that one man should die for the benefit of the whole.

That may be good logic from the view of politicians, but it is not the logic of God.

We celebrate new possibilities represented by a new political administration and are called to pray for it.

But we are also called this day to remember our first and foremost citizenship in God's eternal Kingdom and to remember that this loyalty must ultimately define us.

So we say Yes to good citizenship.

But we say No to the equating of any particular political view with God's will.

Within these dialectical parameters we live our faith.

Come, let us gather around our Lord's table.

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Communion Sunday
January 25, 2009