Sunday, July 2, 1972
GOD SAVE THE STATE
I Peter 2:11-17; I Timothy 2:1-6

This coming Tuesday July 4, we will again celebrate the anniversary of the birth of our nation. So today we want to reexamine what our Christian faith has to say about government and our responsibility as Christian citizens.

In addition to the appropriateness of the day for the theme of this sermon, there are other and more compelling reasons for dealing with the theme. Let's look at some of these reasons and then we'll examine in some detail what our faith has to say to our situation.

1. First, there's something disturbing about the kind of prevailing attitude among many citizens of this country, an attitude which views the government, any kind of government as the enemy. Many of us talk this way. We act as if the City Government, the County Government, State Government, and Federal Government all together are against us. Along with this kind of attitude, we many times go on to view politicians, government officials, be they tax collectors, tax assessors, internal revenue agents, city Councilmen, congressmen, or policeman as enemies.

This is not to say, that we are not to criticize or disagree with actions or policies of a particular arm of government, but government, the order-creating function in a society, is not to be seen as the enemy.

I suppose that such an attitude is nothing too new in our time, although the trend toward the attitude may be more intense. I can remember that as a child I was sometimes puzzled by a prayer which was used from time to time in our church — it is used by most churches — a prayer for the President of the United States and all others in authority. You've heard it. Part of it goes like this — "We pray you to look with favor upon your servants, the President of the United States, and the Governor of the commonwealth, and all others in authority. Fill them with the spirit of wisdom, goodness and truth, and so rule their hearts and bless their endeavors that law and order, justice and peace, may everywhere prevail."

I was puzzled at the prayer because of a general kind of attitude in society that government was a kind of enemy, and thus this prayer seemed to be praying for the enemy. This became a particular problem if the president and those in authority were of the opposite political party than the one to which your family and friends belonged. Then it really seemed as if one were praying for the enemy.

2. Secondly, connected with this general attitude of seeing the government and government officials as enemies is the related tendency to view those of the opposite political party as being especially enemies and even traitors. Or sometimes the person in authority does not have to be in the opposing party, but just one with whom we strongly disagree.

This tendency and attitude became particularly evident following the assassination of President Kennedy, and again following the death of Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and in the attempted assassination of Governor Wallace. In each case the newspapers and magazines contained reports of people's reactions of the events. Some said, "He got what was coming to him!" We read of people who cheered when they got the news, and of those who applauded in public. Before some of the assassinations and attempted assassinations, some had said that

the Kennedy's or Wallace ought to be shot. Others had said that the chief justice of the supreme court ought to be hanged.

Now even though we may disagree with our officials and have the right and duty to disagree or work for the election of someone else, such attitudes as those just mentioned do not breed respect for government or for those in authority.

3. A third tendency and attitude related to what we have just said is that persons who make such statements often think of themselves as the most patriotic. Some confuse love of country with hatred of government officials in general and hatred of government officials of the opposite party in particular. Again, this does not breed respect for government and order in society.

We are now very close to the national political conventions, and this is the year of our national elections as well as the year for the election for many state officials and other major and minor political office holders. Thus, we need to be concerned that as Christians we do not lose sight of the importance of government, the ordering of society, no matter which political party is in power and that we do not breed respect for government by accusing others of being traitors.

Well, these are just a few examples of some attitudes and problems which exist in our society in relationship to government.

Now let's turn to the Bible in an attempt to remind ourselves of the Christian view of government, the ordering of society.

In our first scripture reading this morning we read--"Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. Live as free men, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as servants of God. Honor all men. Love the brotherhood, honor the emperor."

In the second scripture lesson we read, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

Now these passages do not apply direction to our situation for when they were written the state was the authority of the Roman empire. The emperor and his delegates ruled the provinces. Thus, the early Christians did not have the same kind of political responsibility which we do in our time where we live in a country where the government is a representative one and that means that we ourselves share in the authority of the state.

In other words, we should not try to make the New Testament a source of direct political guidance, but rather we are looking for the emphasis in these passages, the attitudes, the presuppositions, and they do have something to say to us in our thinking about the role of government and our part in it as Christians.

What then is the Christian view toward the state, and by "state" we mean government, in these passages and elsewhere in the Bible?

1. Note first that the Biblical writers saw the state, saw government as a God-given necessity. We're not necessarily talking here about nations, or nationalism, but some form of ordering of human life. The Christian sees that kind of ordering as necessary for human life. To put it another way, in the passages from I Peter and I Timothy, there is the implication that God is ordering human life through government and that without government of some kind, even bad government, society would fall into anarchy and chaos.

In fact, the warning against anarchy because of the unruliness of people's sins is one of the most persistent themes in all 6hristian thinking about the state. This means that we are to have a positive attitude toward government, toward the necessity for some kind of order in society — the necessity for referees, and that we are not to take the law into our own hands such as is done in lynching or in the bombing of buildings. Without order of some kind society collapses. In fact, human beings cannot live, in the sense of physical existence, without some kind of order and authority. We have to have systems for adjudicating disputes and making judgments.

At its best, government rests on some kind of agreement, explicit or tacit, providing means of resolving conflicts without violence. In our kind of government, the assumption is that people, to save themselves from chaos and insecurity, transfer some powers from themselves to government. For, example, we give up the right of individual retaliation for the sake of a governmental system that restrains and punishes crime. Persons in conflict, instead of slugging it out in the streets, contest with each other in courts and legislatures. Good government provides a just framework for adjustment of differences.

Again, what the Bible is talking about and emphasizing is the need for some form of government and ordering of society. We all need restraints to keep us from taking advantage of others. The government itself needs restraints to keep it from taking advantage of people.

Thus, God has ordained government as necessary for the regulating and ordering of our human affairs as we live together. As our society becomes more complex, more inter-dependent; as the world becomes more populated, the order creating functions of government become ever more necessary. In a largely rural society, without major cities, major industries and other complex human affairs, there could be years ago much less government, but no more.

The genius of our way of government, of a representative type of democracy, is that it is a middle road between totalitarianism .and anarchy. Our form of government, in spite of its imperfections, is based, I believe, on a Christian realism which sees both sin in persons and good qualities. Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way — "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary."

2. Note secondly, that our Christian Faith urges us to pray for our government, its officials and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way.

In the time that passage was written, the emperor was supreme, so to pray for those in authority meant mainly those in power. In our type of government, there are many in authority, not just the president, his cabinet, and the congress. Certainly, we are to pray for them, but also, for mayors, school board members, school administrators, policeman, lawyers, judges, delegates to political conventions, party chairman and party leaders. Authority is widespread in our time. There is no one place where all the action is. We are even to pray for the opposition,

for again in our type of government, the party out of power becomes the main watchdog of the party in power and helps keep the balance of government.

So, as we approach the anniversary of our nation's founding, our Christian understanding of God and his world reminds us that we are to take a positive attitude toward the order-creating function of government and law. We are called by our Christian faith, not to a superficial patriotism which has as its foundation a narrow nationalism, but rather as Christians our patriotism is based on a profound sense of gratitude to God for this country and government which is based on the consent of the governed.

Join with me now in a prayer for those in authority, and I hope you will pray this kind of prayer regularly.

Almighty God, whose kingdom is an everlasting one and whose dominion endures throughout all generations; we pray you to look with favor upon your servants, the President of the United States, the Governor of this state and all others in authority. Fill them with the spirit of wisdom, goodness, and truth, and so rule their hearts and bless their endeavors that law and order, justice and peace, may everywhere prevail. Preserve us from national sins and corruption. Make us strong and great in the fear of God and in the love of righteousness: reverent in the use of freedom, just in the exercise of power, generous in the protection of the helpless, so that we may become a blessing to all nations; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.