Sunday, April 30, 1995
GOD SAVE THE STATE
I Peter 2:13-17; I Timothy 2:1-6

On Wednesday morning, April 19, at 9:02 a.m. Central Daylight Time, people in our country and many other parts of the world were shocked by the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City and the many deaths and injuries it caused.

The innocent suffering and death of so many children and adults raise all kinds of questions in our minds. Who could have done it? Why would someone do it? Was it done by some terrorist group from another country? What purpose could it serve? Is anyone safe anywhere? How can such acts of terrorism be prevented in the future? And the old nagging question for religious people is always there: "How can a good and loving God allow such things to happen to innocent people?"

As soon as I heard the news and began pondering these questions, I knew that in addition to praying for those who suffered, I had to deliver a sermon on the subject in an attempt to deal with what happened in the context of our Christian faith.

Yet the more I thought and prayed about it, the more I wondered what could be said that would be both meaningful and helpful for us as Christians and citizens of this country. I turned to the Bible for guidance, as I usually do, and what I say in this sermon is based on that and on Bible commentaries by other Christian thinkers.

First of all, even though the violent and irrational attacks of terrorists that cause innocent suffering and death to children and adults shock us as individuals and as a nation, the Bible and our Christian faith remind us that God is with us in the midst of our suffering. God is never caught off guard. God has leaders and helpers in every crisis.

As the Psalmist wrote years ago, "God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult."

Secondly, events like the one on April 19 remind us that we live in a world where the power of evil is still at work and in some surprising places. Many of us initially wanted to believe it was an external terrorist group that planted the explosives. But now it seems certain that it was some of our own citizens who were responsible.

It's also part of the biblical understanding that, in a way, the children and adults who died in the bombing died for our collective sins — the overall sin and evil that are at work in the world at large.

Thirdly, the Bible cautions us in such evil situations not to panic and try to solve the problem with quick, simple solutions. More legislation hastily drawn up is rarely the best help. In one of His most well-known parables, Jesus cautions us not to try to weed out all the evil too quickly, lest we harm the good along with the evil.

An article in the Wall Street Journal last week had the headline, "California's Three Strikes Law Strikes Out." The gist of the article was that "based on the evidence thus far, 'three strikes'

laws appear to offer modest potential benefits while proving both expensive and arbitrary." It underscores the issue that Jesus was talking about: sometimes, in our efforts to solve complex problems too quickly and too simply, we only make matters worse.

Hopefully, all those involved will be arrested soon and brought to justice. But once they are sentenced and maybe even put to death, let us remember that the evil that was in them is still around. Good ideas and even bad ideas are not killed by killing people.

What, then, are some positive actions that we as Christians can take?

First of all, we can continue to be thankful that we live in a country where, despite such a violent and untimely act, order prevails. I continue to be impressed with the outpouring of help and support for the victims and their families from all over the country. I also continue to be impressed with the speed and efficiency with which our various arms of government responded and are still responding.

It wasn't very long ago that I heard a member of Congress ask, "Can you name any one thing that government does well?" Even before this tragedy, I could have enumerated a long list.

In the same vein, I often smile when I hear people say, "We ought to run the government like a business." And I want to ask, "Which business?" I read the Wall Street Journal carefully every day it is published, and there is at least one news story a week describing bad decisions, inefficiency, and waste that occur in businesses as well as in government and other non-profit organizations. I read about the promotion of executives who have failed as business leaders or who are unethical. I read about bonuses being paid to business leaders whose companies are near bankruptcy or haven't made a profit for a long time. I read about poor quality service, rude employees, and other problems in business. None of us — profit, non-profit, religious groups, churches, or government agencies — has a corner on the market of imperfection or perfection.

Furthermore, no one with any sense maintains that a representative form of government is an easy form of government. For those who like things neat, it is too flexible and unruly. For absolutists, it is too accommodating of compromise. A dictatorship can be very efficient, as Hitler proved. But if you try to plan and control people's minds, you stunt them; you get censorship, the secret police, and more.

This is, of course, the classic conflict between order and freedom, between the need for fences so that vast unwieldy institutions can be kept under control and the need for open spaces so that the individual spirit will not wither. That tension between order and freedom can never be completely resolved, and Jesus knew that.

Secondly, the Bible and our Christian faith not only emphasize that we are to be thankful for the order-creating function of government, but we are to understand government officials and civil workers, whether appointed or elected, as ministers of God. It is a high calling to be in public service, whether as a police officer, a firefighter, a public school teacher, an IRS employee, or as governor or President. These people are not to be seen as the enemy.

I worry because there has been and still is a prevailing attitude among many of us that tends to view the government as the enemy. This attitude existed long before radio and television talk shows came into being. I can remember hearing it as a child growing up, and that was a long time ago. I remember it because I was puzzled by a prayer that was used from time to time in our church, a prayer for the President of the United States and all others in authority. I

wondered why we were praying for the enemy, especially if the President or any of the other officials were of the opposite political party.

I'm not saying that we should not criticize or debate government policy positions. Especially in our form of representative government, political debate and discussion are necessary. Years ago, I memorized Reinhold Niebuhr's statement, "Our human capacity for justice makes democracy possible. Our human capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary."

Let's now look at the Bible more specifically to remind ourselves of the Christian view of government.

In one of the scripture readings we heard: "For the Lord's sake, accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor." (1 Peter 2:13-17)

In the second scripture reference, we heard: "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." (1 Timothy 2:1-2)

These references do not apply directly 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 that we do in our time, where we live in a country with a representative form of government. That means that we ourselves participate in the authority of the state. We are the government.

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.

Note first that the biblical writers saw the state, saw government, as a God-given necessity. The Bible is not talking about nations or nationalism, but some form of ordering of human life. The Christian sees that kind of ordering as necessary for human life. There is the implication that God is ordering human life through government and that without government, 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 Christian thinking about the state. This means we are to have a positive attitude toward the necessity of 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 lynchings 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 the

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 the adjustment of differences.

In other words, the Bible is saying, government is necessary. Do not think of government as the enemy, but as being ordained by God. As I said earlier, the Bible speaks of government officials as being ministers of God.

Again, I want to emphasize that the Bible does not say that we are not to criticize government or to debate issues regarding the proper functioning of government. Most people would agree that a government can become too intrusive into our lives, can become too powerful, and even dictatorial. That's what the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to our Constitution, is all about.

As Christians, we realize that the ordering of society according to rules and laws is necessary primarily because of human sin. Can you imagine high school football, college football, or professional football without referees or official timekeepers, or baseball without umpires?

We need police officers, courts of law, local, state, and federal regulatory agencies. We need such things as laws regulating speed, parking, truces, and stoplights. It would be chaos without them. We all need restraints to keep us from taking unfair advantage of others. The government also needs restraints to keep it from taking advantage of its citizens.

As our society becomes more complex, more interdependent, and as the world becomes more heavily populated, the order-creating functions of government become ever more necessary.

In a largely rural society with a widely scattered and sparse population and without major cities, major industries, and other complex human affairs, there was less need for referees.

So today, as we remember the suffering and death of so many innocent people in the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building, in addition to praying for those families, let us also pray for those who work in all the departments of our various governments, and let us thank God for our government and the order it creates.

Join with me now in praying the prayer that is printed on your order of worship:

Almighty God, whose love is everlasting and whose power endures throughout all generations, we remember in our prayers 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 Savior. Amen.