

The passage from Ephesians that we read today has been a troublesome and often misunderstood passage and has been used by many a Christian preacher (always a male) who has mounted his pulpit to proclaim with abnormal vigor and vulgar solemnity that here in the word of God is that key passage which clearly indicates that a women's place is in the home submitted to her husband. For does it not say, here plainly in the scripture, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord." Clearly a mandate from God. Or is it?

Perhaps the authors of the lectionary are up to something else. Perhaps they are hoping that by setting this passage in a non-matrimonial service between an appropriate Old Testament lesson and an appropriate Gospel lesson they might at last set this passage free...free from personal and perjorative use by men who would twist the word of God to suit their own ends. For you see, that is exactly what the author of Ephesians has done. He has taken a common first century cultural assumption about the relationship of men and women and twisted it to suit the new life of Jesus Christ. But the casual reader and the poor exegete will, of course, miss that, as will the literalist preacher who is content to look no further in the Bible than the line in question for his textual evidence of God's will.

Let us do differently. Let us follow the authors of the lectionary and see what they have offered us for our consideration. The setting of the passage from Joshua is a ceremony of covenant renewal between God and his people. Having recited the acts of God that indicate his loving faithfulness towards his people, Joshua puts the question to his people. Are you going to serve and be faithful to God or not? He goes on to say that one cannot promise to serve God and then not do it, for God will be really angry at a broken promise. But the central question for the tribes on that day is, who are you going to serve? Not a bad question for us to answer either.

In our time and culture when we place a high priority on personal freedom and glibly fantasize that we can do what ever we want, when we want, we tend to forget the things and people that are our true masters. We serve our bellies, our possessions, our own sets of wants and needs. Are you free? Try holding your breath for five minutes and see how that works. Try not eating. Try living without learning...try living without money. The truth is that we all serve something or someone. So the question this day is Joshua's question, who are we going to serve?

The lesson from the Gospel recounts for us the withdrawal of some of the disciples from following Jesus after his teaching about the bread of life. Access to eternal life, he proclaimed, comes only through the appropriation of himself. Stated in the graphic terms of the gospel the nature of the intimacy between the disciple and Jesus must occur by the consumption of the very body and blood of Jesus, and then and only then will the disciple find eternal life.

It is Joshua's question all over again. Choose this day whom you will serve. Is it going to be Jesus, the Son of God, or is it going to be your own construct of a way to God and his eternal life? The terms of the covenant and contract had been struck. This is my commandment that you love one another. I will be your God, you will be my people...I am the bread of life, you must eat this bread...Reconciliation with God begins with the crucifixion of Jesus. And the very nature of the intimate bonding between Jesus and salvation was too much for many of the disciples and they withdrew. They could not submit themselves, if you will, to the will of God. A divorce took place.

Now then if we get off the line about wives submitting themselves to

their husbands, we find an adjacent line that suggests not only that husbands love their wives, which in fact was an outrageous statement in its day and context, but further that husbands love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. That, dear friends in Christ, was, when it reached the streets of Ephesus for the first time, about as radical a notion as suggesting that the United States unilaterally surrender to the Soviets. What the author of Ephesians had done was to take an ordinary cultural assumption, namely that the male was hierarchically superior to the female and reduce that claim to ashes. He begins the discussion by suggesting that everyone, males and females, be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ. That claim for equality was shocking enough. But then to go on and suggest that the male should sacrifice himself for the preservation of the personhood and identity of the female, well, that was truly out of the question. Tough stuff even in this day and age.

But now set this passage into the whole context of the letter to the Ephesians and another often overlooked reality comes clear. The author is not saying so much about marriage as he is saying something about the church. In the first chapters he has set down a doctrinal claim that the church is the sign of the Kingdom of God, created by God, established by Jesus, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the new creation. In the last three chapters he gives directions to his listeners about what that new creation should look like. Picking up the image of the intimate bond of the marriage contract, he uses that as a vehicle to describe the intimate connection and relationship between Christ and the church. Jesus is the head, the church is his body...was another such image. Faithfulness, fidelity, mutual giving and sacrifice, all are key elements between God and his people. What the author is saying is that while there may in fact be a hierarchical relationship between man and women in principle, there is in fact in the love relationship the reality that the man loves his wife as his own body. He is saying that at root there is a covenant and contract to marriage not dissimilar to the covenant and contract between God and his people, but there is more to marriage than covenant and contract-- there is love. Dedicated sacrificial love. Love that is a matter of the transformed heart, not the obedient slave. Such is the love of Christ for the church, Such should be the love of the church for Christ...such should be the love of the husband for the wife and the wife for the husband and in next week's passage we will learn should be the love of the parent for the child and the child for the parent and should be the love of the members of the community for each other.

The author of Ephesians is witnessing to what the kingdom of God is like. It is like a marriage - a covenant relationship between two parties - like a husband and wife. We find a clue to our relationship with God by how we live out our faith with each other. In serving one another in the name of Christ, we are serving Christ himself. Therefore, choose this day whom you shall serve, but for me, I will serve the Lord by loving my husband, and by loving you. AMEN

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... We find a close relationship with God and
... in the name of
... I will serve you, I will love you, I will love my husband, and by
... I will love you, Amen

8/26/85

Kathy -

Enclosed is the copy
of Sunday's sermon -
George, Beverly, Judy Laerr,
Brian Geatz & yourself
wanted a copy -

Also when you give
Richard Moore a copy
of the membership list,
please include the
following people which
are not on the list you
gave me:

256-3840

Judy Laerr
RR # 3, Box 24

256-3723

Mark & Rose Schirmer
(Viola Cole will know address)

256-9428 Michael & Katherine Clites

492-8465 Patty Van Hove
(Judy will know her
address)

Thank you, thank you
for your friendship & your
ministry - I was overwhelmed
with the generous gift
yesterday - The Lord continually
draps blessing after
blessing and I do feel
blessed indeed -

God bless
Karen