

Lunch at Pomodoros
Ephesians 5: 21-33
Sermon by Reverend Mary Rodgers
August 20, 2006

Ephesians 5:12-32

21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22 Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he nourishes and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—30 for we are members of his body. 31 "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." 32 This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Pomodoros restaurant in Fairfax is my favorite place to eat. It has the best pizza in the area. Brick oven, fresh ingredients, great sauce and an excellent crust. The price is very reasonable too. But the main reason it's my favorite restaurant is because it's like Cheers for me. I go in and "*everybody knows my name.*" When I phone in an order they know my voice and ask me if I want the usual. They are always glad to see me. It's a great restaurant so I take all of my out-of-town guests there. Back in June I took my friend Mike. He and I were in Seminary together and we hadn't seen each other for years. Near the end of the lunch a lovely woman with the cutest little baby (toddler) in her arms came over to our table. She tapped me on the shoulder, apologized profusely for interrupting us and then asked me if I had been to Seminary. Yes, we both have I said. And she politely and apologetically asked if she could ask me a question. Of course I said yes. What else was I going to say? Plus she had that really cute baby in her arms and I couldn't resist. What would you like to know? I asked. "Can you tell me about what it means in the Bible when it says: 'Wives submit to your husbands?'" Ok so I wasn't expecting that! "Honey sit down," I said. It was all very comical at the moment but also serious.

Let me ask you: What would you have said to this woman? How would you have answered her question? Maybe you would have just dismissed the passage telling her that it is archaic and that it's best just to ignore it. That's what most mainline moderates such as ourselves do...we ignore it. In fact, over the past few weeks the lectionary (or recommended passages for each Sunday) has been moving through the book of Ephesians. Last week, the passage was about speaking truthfully and how to live with one another. This week, in the passage we read earlier, we are encouraged to live wisely and thankfully. Next week the passage is about putting on the armor of God. And then the book ends. So if you follow the lectionary guess what passage is left out? You got it. *Wives Submit to your husbands.* One way to handle this is to leave the passage out, ignore it. But in this situation it doesn't seem to be the best way to handle her question.

Maybe you decide to talk about biblical interpretation and about how often the Bible is used to hurt one another. You tell her about your friend Pam who went to her priest

because her husband was physically abusing her and the priest quoted this passage and told her that if she would just submit he would stop beating her.

Or maybe you would take a different tactic. Reaching down into your brief case you'd pull out your Bible and say let's see what else we find in the passage pointing out that just before "*wives submit to your husband*" the Bible says "*submit to one another in reverence to Christ.*" Well that's hopeful isn't it? *Submit to one another.* At that point you might decide to key in on the word submit or on the idea of submission and talk with her about what it does and does not mean. You assure her that submission does NOT mean being a door mat. It doesn't mean having no voice or blind obedience. You remind her that in the truest sense biblical submission is a voluntary act and if you are coerced into submission then it's not submission at all. At this point in the conversation you might try to think of a really good story or example of submission but you quickly realize that many of the stories you come up with sound trite or they lift up and even glorify something that can be unhealthy. You begin to feel frustrated because it dawns on you that everyone has a different experience of this passage and of submission. Some people have struggled and stayed in abusive marriages because of this verse, other people think that the whole idea is ridiculous and still there other people, men and women who have had positive experiences of submitting to one another. And you realize that you have no idea where the lovely lady you are talking sits on the vast continuum of experience with the Bible and with submission. You also realize that walking around in this passage is like walking around in a yard full of land mines.

So maybe at this point, after having thought through all the possibilities you decide to take a whole new path. Instead of focusing on women and submission you decide to look at the passage to see what it says about men. This is definitely a road less traveled in your opinion. As you begin to walk down this road you are delighted to remember that a couple weeks ago one of your pastors preached on this very passage and you just happen to have with you, on your person, the chart that she put in the bulletin that day to help you dig deeper into the passage (Oh look you have it too!).

SERMON NOTES

Husband/Wife

Christ/Church

22 – Wives “submit” or be subject to husband

-“as to the Lord”

23 – Husband is head of the wife

-As Christ is head of the church

24 – Repetition of vs. 22

-As the Church is subject to Christ

25 – Husbands love your wives

-25-27 - As Christ Loved the Church and gave himself up for her

28 – Husbands love wives as they love their own bodies, he who loves his wife loves himself. No one hates his own body, he nourishes and tenderly cares for it.

-As Christ does the Church

So you grab it praying that God will at least give you one caring, pastoral, intelligent thing to say to this woman. Now what was it that the pastor said? Oh Yeah, looking at

the chart you remember her saying that you cannot ponder marriage or relationships in a Christian context without think about the relationship of Christ and the church. Hmm. Christ and the church. Now that may be a way to go. You see that verse 23 is the first verse that directly addresses a husband's role it says *the husband is the head of the wife* (uh oh, that's a potential land mine) so you keep reading and it says *as Christ is head of the Church*.

Thank God for Paul and the chart because you if you stand on this foundation, it is pretty clear that husbands are to love their wives like Christ loved the church which in every day language and living can mean many things. In this context, the welfare of his wife is the most important thing to a husband. It means that he will do things that communicate love in a way that she will understand. It means that he will encourage her by giving her the space and the freedom to become who God means her to be. It means that he will love her and protect her and provide for her not just physically but emotionally and spiritually as well. It means that he loves her so much that he is willing to give his life for her. Now as you think about saying all this it begins to dawn on you that in this context, in the context of trust and safety and love, *submission* might not be as bad as it seems. That when a husband loves his wife as Christ loves the church then submission just might be a natural response to loving leadership. But (there is always a *but* isn't there) the more you think about the possibility of this new path, the more you're not so sure that this is the right way to go because in many ways it communicates a hierarchy of relationship and you not so sure that a hierarchy is what God intended. You are beginning to understand why the makers of the lectionary left this passage out. It's *a really hard passage!* But, never one to quit, you are reminded that good biblical interpretation requires that whenever you encounter a hard passage you are to interpret in light of the whole Gospel and in light of easier passages. Does a hierarchical interpretation of this passage fit into the fundamental message of the gospel that says that in Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all are one in Christ? You're not so sure.

So let me ask you. Have you found anything you can hang your hat on yet? If you haven't maybe the thing do is to begin, as all good Presbyterians do, by exploring the context of the passage. What kind of world was Paul writing in? Who was he writing to? How were women viewed in his day? Many people have accused Paul of being a woman hater, is that really true? Knowing this would certainly help you understand the passage better. What did Paul think about women? At this point you are reminded of a sermon you read by a guy name Victor Shepherd who said In his letter to the church in Galatia, Paul states without qualification that in Jesus Christ there is neither male nor female. Regardless of how any society or any subgroup in a society treats women, in Christ men and women stand on level ground.

Now, Shepherd says, if you doubt this you need to only consider the mindset of ancient Greece to know just how radically woman friendly he was. Socrates maintained that being born a woman is divine punishment, since a woman is halfway between a man and an animal. To be sure, Socrates did say that a woman could serve in the armed forces – after all, he argued, a female dog is as useful to a shepherd as a male dog. Aristotle noticed that a swarm of bees is led by one bee in particular; it has to be a king bee, since males are by nature more fit to command than are females. Aristotle maintained that men show their courage by giving orders, while women show their courage by following orders. In ancient Athens women took no part in public affairs, never appeared with men

at meals, and never appeared with men on social occasions. The Greek Stoic philosophers who came after Socrates and Aristotle maintained that women are but a distraction and a temptation. Things were better in ancient Sparta. In fact at one point Sparta's women owned two-thirds of the nation's land. Things were better too in ancient Egypt. But Sparta and Egypt never did influence the world as much as Athens did. In the Roman era (following the Greek era) a woman was permitted to accompany her husband socially but was still regarded as humanly inferior. In Jewish circles it was a little better. While the Hebrew bible depicted many women as heroes, (Deborah, Ruth, Rahab) rabbinic teaching, that is, the teaching of the rabbis in contrast to the teaching of scripture, generally devalued women. It was regarded improper for a man to speak to a woman in public, even if she were his wife. If a married woman spoke to a man on the street, said the rabbis, her husband could divorce her on the grounds that her conversation was considered adultery.

How revolutionary Jesus was then. Every day he spoke with women in public. They spoke with him. He included women in his band of disciples. They traipsed around with him and supported him. *Scandalous!* He permitted a woman (in public, no less) to wipe his feet with her hair, when a woman whose hair wasn't tied up was looked upon as a seductress. Paul certainly knew the gospel accounts of Jesus. Paul certainly knew how revolutionary Jesus had been, and just as certainly he endorsed it. Paul mentions female believers by name – itself part of the Jesus revolution. He speaks of Syntyche and Euodia, two women in the congregation in Philippi “who struggled beside me (not under me!) in the gospel.” These women were on a par with the apostle himself in his ministry. Paul speaks of Prisca and Aquila as “fellow workers in Jesus Christ.” Prisca and Aquila were a married couple. Paul mentions the woman's name, Prisca, ahead of her husband's. That, in and of itself is noteworthy. At the conclusion of his Roman letter Paul mentions several church leaders by name, among whom are eight women. The revolution which Jesus launched Paul did not stifle. He practiced what he preached. In Jesus Christ there is neither male nor female. (*History of Women and Paul is taken from You asked for a Sermon on What Paul Really Said About Women by Victor Shepherd*) Knowing all this history makes vs 21 seem much more important doesn't it. *Submit to one another in reverence to Christ.*

So, what are you going to say when the lovely woman with the toddler on her lap, or the mother at the soccer game or the couple at the cocktail party asks you to tell them what it means when the Bible says “Wives submit to your husbands?” Mike and I handled it differently. He immediately jumped into biblical interpretation. I said one thing, which was: “tell me why you want to know.” This woman and I have kept up a relationship, mostly by email but we are planning to have coffee together. I'm getting to know her and why she asked the question. God does work in mysterious ways. If it weren't for God working through her I would have NEVER chosen to preach on this passage. But as hard as this passage is I somehow get the sense that through this ongoing struggle of how to live faithfully, she and I are somehow going to be blessed. So, it's your turn, what will you say?

Amen