

Ephesians VII
Ephesians 5: 15-33**Pastor Chris Bellefeuille**
August 22/23, 2009

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

The passage from Ephesians that we read today is not actually in the lectionary of scheduled readings this summer. But it is an important passage and an often debated one. It seemed important that it not be skipped, so we made the decision to include it in our sermons series out of faithfulness to the text.

Sister Carolyn Osiek is professor of New Testament at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas. She is the president-elect of the Society of Biblical Literature, a member of the International Society of the Sacred Heart, a well-regarded Bible scholar and widely published author. She describes this passage as a “beautiful but dangerous text.”

And it is, indeed, both beautiful and dangerous. The language admonishing wives to be subject to their husbands has been used for generations to allow the exploitation and mistreatment of women. One friend’s husband actually held the passage out to her as he explained what he believed to be his God-given right to demand her obedience and punish her physically when she failed to deliver. The passage we read is followed closely by instructions for children and parents and then an instruction that slaves be obedient to their masters. This has been interpreted by some, although not many any more, to say that the Bible supports slavery. These passages do include exhortations to husbands and masters to treat their wives and slaves well. But the implied acceptance of hierarchical relationships within the household has nonetheless been problematic, even dangerous.

Pretty grim beginning, don't you think? Not very reminiscent of the God of unity and inclusion that we read of in the first 4 chapters of Ephesians. That is one of the risks of reading just a single part of any given letter, Gospel or Old Testament writing. It is easy to lose track of the context. And we need to the context to help make sense of what we are reading. And the context of Ephesians is one of hope, love and unity in the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. So let's back up a bit and take a closer look at this beautiful and dangerous text.

First some important historical background: at the time this was written, there was a good deal being written in the secular Greek culture about how to run a household. Instructions like these would have had a familiar ring to the hearer. However, the only person mentioned in most of the secular writing is the male head of household and how he was to lead his household and manage the members of it. There was no pro-active role for anyone else to play.

Ephesians may not seem all that special then to our modern ears but it would have been startlingly different to the original audience. The author of Ephesians calls every member of the household by name: wife, husband, child, parent, slave and master. Not only does Ephesians name each member, but offers an active role for each of them to play in the household. This may seem an insignificant difference but is actually a very important one. A Christian household, as compared to the secular households of the time, was to be an inclusive one with every member contributing to its success.

Yes, we still see reflected there the ancient secular norms of a male head of household and legitimate slave-ownership. But the Holy Word of God as found in Scripture is a dynamic thing with wisdom to speak across the ages, even in the face of change in the structure of the household...changes accepted not only by many, if not all, of the culture, but accepted and affirmed by many, if not all, in the church – such as the abolition of slavery and the changing roles of women. Things have changed. But these changes have not diminished the relevance and importance of this passage for our lives together in modern Christian households. In the face of the dangerous beauty of this text, the long history of its misuse, and accepted changes in societal norms, how do we faithfully respond to what we find here? How does it retain importance and relevance for us?

This passage is most commonly read beginning with the 21st or 22nd verse. I intentionally chose to have our reading begin at verse 15 because of a translational decision made by the two of the most widely used versions of the Bible among Lutherans: the NRSV and the NIV. In both of these versions, verse 21 is set aside as a discreet exhortation. "Be subject to one another..." Just as you see it printed in your bulletin. But a little digging led to a helpful and important discovery. Verse 21 is not an exhortation to be set apart. Rather it is an extension of verse 20. I invite you to listen and hear how it sounds using a more accurate translation. I will begin at verse 18.

"So do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ."

This reading, as intended by the author, creates a new framework for hearing this passage and its relevance for our lives. Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ is something we are called to do as part of a worshipping community. A community which gathers in the unity of the Spirit to live together the one life to which we have been called, filled with the Spirit and singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs together. Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ makes the worshipping community the foundational relationship on which all other relationships are based: husbands and wives, parents and children, employers and employees, neighbors and friends.

Submission is not acquiescing to abuse or slavery. It was never intended to be understood that way. Submission means living in mutual humility, gentleness, patience and love as inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is with this understanding of mutual submission in Christian community that we exchange marital vows. It is with this understanding of mutual submission in Christian community that we manage our households and instruct and admonish our children. It is with this understanding of mutual submission in Christian community that we fight for the good of our shared lives together.

Our relationship as a worshipping community is to be the foundational relationship of the whole our lives. We gather here on Sunday mornings to sing, to pray, to come before God and receive in our hands bread and wine. We are gathered as Republicans and Democrats, supporters and opponents of the war, gay and straight, young and old, liberal and conservative, male and female, pro-life and pro choice, married, divorced, living-together and single. We gather together in love and hope, not shaped by animosity or ordered by hierarchies but by the centrality of Jesus Christ and the grace that has been freely bestowed on each of us in equal measure. Christ's blood poured out for the sake of all people.

The ELCA Youth council gave a brief presentation at the church wide assembly this week. There were about 12 teenagers on the stage and one-by-one they took the mike and stepped forward and made a statement of belief. Their beliefs ranged from the silly to the sublime but they ended with one young woman saying: "Although we are a diverse church, Jesus loves me!" And as the audience laughed, again they each took the mike and said "Jesus loves me." And after all were finished they shouted out "And Jesus loves you too." In the midst of emotional and often heated debate, their proclamation of this central message of our lives stood as a beacon of hope and unity. Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ means to keep this at the forefront of our minds: Jesus loves me and Jesus loves you. Secure in the knowledge and grace of that love, we stand together as one body, called to one life in Christ. And we sing. Amen.