

Some of you, right now, are no doubt wondering, “Why in the world did he choose this passage and *what* is he going to do with it.” Your confusion would likely be enhanced if you knew that this passage isn’t the lectionary epistle for this week and, in fact, doesn’t appear in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary at all. One used to hear the first part of the passage, 5:22-33, at weddings a lot but it’s fallen into disuse. The idea of wifely submission makes most of us cringe at the very least, if not get ready to stand and protest, or leave. But, as you’ve probably figured out by now, I’m intrigued by those parts of scripture that are difficult or controversial, the ones left out of the official literature of Sunday School lessons or lectionary. Fools rush in where wise men fear to tread. I guess it’s just my subversive streak. But I think I’m in good company with that attitude. Believe it or not, we can find some pretty compelling evidence of a subversive streak in Paul, thanks to this passage. I’ll get to that in a few minutes but, first, let’s take a look at the context in which this passage was written.

In including this advice on what might be called household management, Paul is traveling a well-worn path. “Household management” texts in Paul’s day dealt not only with what we would consider home life but also business since most business was then conducted at home. Such treatises were as popular in ancient times as they are today. The bookstores are full of books on parenting and marital advice and the New York Times devotes separate sections of its best-seller lists to hardback and paperback books of business advice. In the ancient world, no less an authority than Aristotle devoted a portion of his work on “Politics” to household issues: “Now that it is clear what are the component parts of the state, we have first of all to discuss household management; for every state is composed of households... The investigation of everything should begin with the smallest parts, and the primary and smallest parts of the household are master and slave, husband and wife, father and children; we ought therefore to examine the proper constitution and character of these three relationships...” The point, as Andrew Lincoln writes in his commentary on Ephesians, is “that proper household management was generally regarded as a matter of crucial social and political concern and that any upsetting of the traditional hierarchical order of the household could be considered a potential threat to the order of society as a whole.” We’ll also return to this idea a little later.

It’s important to remember, I think, that the status of women and children was far different in Imperial Rome than it is in 21st Century America. As the Rev. Dr. Francis Wade puts it, “Women in Paul’s day were property ~ they were baby machines and home support for male centered economic enterprises.” A woman’s rights to property or the freedom of her own body were severely curtailed, as unfortunately they were to remain for most of the next two millennia across the world. As to children, Dionysius of Halicarnassus wrote: “The law-giver of the Romans gave virtually full power to the father over his son, whether he thought it proper to imprison him, to scourge him, to put him in chains, and keep him at work in the fields, or to put him to death; and this even though the son were already engaged in public affairs, though he were numbered among the highest magistrates, and though he were celebrated for his zeal for the commonwealth.” Even a husband who apparently had the tenderest relationship with his wife could display an attitude towards his daughters that would shock us today. Here’s a portion of a letter from the first century: “Polarian to Alice, his wife. Heartiest greetings. Know that we are still even now in Alexandria. Do not worry if when all others return, I remain in Alexandria. I beg and beseech of you to take care of the little child and as soon as we receive wages I will send them to you. If, good luck to you, you have a child and it is to be a boy, let it live. If it is a girl,

throw it out. You told Ephadepheus to tell me. Do not forget me. How can I forget you? I beg you, therefore, not to worry.” Andrew Lincoln also notes “that a Roman master could sell a slave only once, but if a Roman father sold his child and the child became free at a later stage, the father could sell the child again.”

Slavery, of course, was a normal part of the economy of the Empire. In fact, it has been estimated that fully one-third of the populations of Italy and Greece were slaves. It was, as it remained until just 140 years ago in our own country, an accepted part of life, even by the slaves. By the time of the Empire, the great slave revolts were long over. Certain training and professions were primarily reserved for slaves and, by virtue of their lifelong positions, they had a measure of personal and social security not enjoyed by poor freemen. Indeed, records show that many people actually sold themselves into slavery in order to have access to training, social contacts and a better standard of living. Nevertheless, slaves were still at the complete whim of their masters who were constrained from brutal treatment more by societal norms and common sense than by law.

As I mentioned earlier, the rigid household hierarchy of the all-powerful *pater familia* and the subordinate wife, children and slaves was considered crucial to the general peace and security of the state. One of the most damning charges against the Christian movement, in the eyes of the good people of Roman society, was that the Christians and their teaching disturbed this natural order of things. It has often been remarked by historians that Christianity attracted a high percentage of women and slaves as it penetrated the Roman Empire. Any religion that caused members of a household to abandon the practices of the head of the household would be under suspicion as a potential threat to societal order. Writing at the beginning of the Second Century, the great Roman historian Tacitus attacks the Jews (and he may have included Christians in that category) for just such a transgression: “Those who converted to their ways follow the same practice and the earliest lesson they receive is to despise the gods, to disown their country, and to regard their parents, children and brothers as of little account.” Little wonder that in this world, the new religion with its deification of a crucified criminal, its appeal to women and slaves and its blessing of the poor and dispossessed was considered dangerous in the extreme.

Within this context, it can be easy to interpret Paul’s writing in our passage as a work of shrewd pragmatism. On its surface, it can be understood as an appeal to the preservation of the status quo. “Wives, be subject to your husbands... Children, obey your parents... Slaves, obey your earthly masters.” It is excellent advice from a politically astute leader who wants to keep his followers from running afoul of the authorities over “hot button” but minor issues so that the more important work of the movement, evangelization, can continue. Paul had, after all, instructed the Romans in his epistle to them that “every person (should) be subject to the governing authorities.” This is advice from the “all things to all people” Paul, the preacher who knew how to be “a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks,” who had his assistant, Timothy, circumcised to avoid giving offense to Jews and Jewish believers even though he argued against teaching such practice. It would appear that what Paul is saying in our passage is, “Hey, don’t rock the boat. Get along to get ahead.” For centuries, commentators and preachers have considered this an entirely acceptable message from the Apostle to the Gentiles.

But I think this misses another, equally important contextual layer. What is the context of our passage within the Epistle to the Ephesians, within Paul's other writings and within the gospel that Paul was so intent on spreading? We began our study of Ephesians some weeks ago, as I hope you will remember, with a look at the first 14 verses of the letter; a passage that I called the "thesis statement" of the epistle: that God is to be praised for loving us as God's own children, for making us part of the plan that centers in Christ for drawing all the world to God. We looked at how, in chapter two, Paul talks about the walls that divide us from one another and from God being shattered by the work of Jesus. We've heard Paul's great prayer in chapter three, that the Spirit of Jesus would dwell in our hearts, root us and ground us in love and bring us to fullness in God. Finally, we've read together how Paul begs Christians to remember that we are one body, with one Spirit, responsible to work together for the good of all. Does all of this writing about unity, love and the example of Christ Jesus simply disconnect from the last half of chapter five and the first of chapter six? Or can we draw some new conclusions about what Paul is up to when we connect this morning's passage with the rest of the letter? Yes, Paul could be pragmatic but this passage was written by the same man who wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." That same Jesus who is the center of God's plan and who Paul, in Ephesians, has prayed will dwell in our hearts is the one who, Paul wrote, "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" That same Jesus is the one who in his ministry ignored social and gender barriers and held up the children as exemplars of the Kingdom of God.

In engaging with the context of the remainder of Ephesians, the Pauline corpus and the Gospel of Christ, I believe we can move from seeing the message of our passage as being so pragmatic and conservative on the face of it to seeing something deeply subversive and idealistic. I mentioned earlier that writings of advice on household management were popular in Paul's day. All of those works were written with a single audience in mind: the male head of the household. It was their job, in that culture, to keep their wives, children and slaves in line. But look at our passage. It is addressed not only to the men, but also to the wives, children and slaves. In fact, it addresses them first. In Paul's view, taken from the teachings of his Lord, all human beings were moral agents, capable of and responsible to God for the ordering of their spiritual lives and relationships with God and their neighbors. This is a radical view for Rome or for Jerusalem, where men were charged with the spiritual leadership of their families. Those popular Roman books on household management taught men how to rule their families and businesses but Paul is busy telling men not to rule but to love, not to provoke, not to threaten. According to Sr. Carolyn Osiek, professor of New Testament at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Paul has moved the concept of proper relationship within the household from being seen as a microcosm of the Imperial state to being regarded as a microcosm of the Church, the love-filled Body of Christ. Wendell Frerichs writes, "The authority which Christ has over us is the persuasive power of his sacrificial love, not the coercive power of a dictator."

I think I've mentioned before from this pulpit one of my seminary professors in New Testament, Dr. Harold Songer. One of the things that Dr. Songer convinced me of in his classes is that you can always understand Paul's writings best when you remember his experience on the road to

Damascus. Paul's transforming encounter with the risen Christ formed the basis of his theology and his life from that moment on. He never got over it, indeed, he remained "on fire" with the Spirit of Jesus for the rest of his life. When I read this passage, I read Paul's seemingly impossible directive to the Christians in Ephesus, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ," and I have no doubt not only that he meant it wholeheartedly but that he fully expected his readers to be able to live up to it. Grammatically, this admonition to be subject to one another is an expansion on the idea in the last half of verse 18, "Be filled with the Spirit." In his blazing Spirit-filled idealism, Paul could write to the Philippians, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," and he could expect that the same would be true for all followers of Christ. That one high goal of being subject to one another is the key to this pragmatic, subversive and idealistic passage.

In the same way that Paul described Christ emptying himself to become a servant for all the world, so are we called to yield to one another. When Paul writes, "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord," he is presuming the achievement of the previous statement by both husbands and wives, "Be subject to one another." The wives here are not being advised to subjugate themselves to male authority, but rather to wholeheartedly accept the Christ-like love to which their husbands are called: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." Gentlemen, for us to love our wives as Christ loved the church means we must be prepared to give up anything, all we have, to secure our wives' happiness and best interests. Some of us are slow to learn that. I've dragged my wife all over the country in pursuit of my dreams and callings, sometimes to her detriment. She has often done a far better job than I in exemplifying Christ's love to me, giving up the security and stability she has desired in favor of my well-intentioned but sometimes quixotic pursuits. If we are subject to one another as the Church is to Christ, neither will dominate the other but act as Christ toward one another and we can be subject to one another with the greatest confidence for, as Brian Findlayson writes in his commentary on this passage, "Our relationship with Jesus," which is the model for our marital relationships, "is one of great individual freedom and expression and is certainly not oppressive and destructive of personality." As Stephen Miletic points out in his book on marriage and the new creation, "One Flesh," "both (marital) roles demand total self-renunciation." Findlayson also comments, "Marriage produces a psychological bond whereby the well-being of a partner is emphatically experienced by the other partner, and vice versa. To love one's (spouse) is to love oneself." Paul was quite right. No one ever hates his or her own body.

Most of us, I suspect, have less immediate difficulty with Paul's admonition to children to obey their parents than with his advice for wives. Again, we parents do well to remember that the loving Christ who honors us with his grace and friendship embraced the gifts of children as preeminent in the Kingdom. Truly, as the Psalmist wrote, we are blessed by our children. They have things to teach us as well as learning from us. Paul calls us to bring them up lovingly, not tasking them to excess but giving them the benefit of the best we have learned about the way of the Lord. Andrew Lincoln recommends this passage on the child-parent relationship as being a guide for the contemporary Christian family, which walks the fine line of parental discipline and encouragement. It provides us with a compass, he writes, as we "attempt to express and live out the mutual honor, respect, and loving admonition at the heart of the Christian message in a world where, on the one hand, parental power can be frequently abused, including even the sexual

abuse of children, and, on the other hand, attempts to exercise moral discipline or correction of a child can frequently be denounced in the name of a child's freedom or autonomy.”

Paul's advice to employees and employers, if we modernize it as such, addresses issues that are as modern as a focus on healthy marriages and child rearing. Taking them in reverse order, there is a pretty clear directive to bosses to abandon “management by intimidation.” I'm sorry to say that I think most of us who've been in the work force have encountered this particular administrative style among Christians and non-Christians alike. In fact, I once worked for a ministry organization, which I shall not name, where the CEO often resorted to intimations of firings, withheld bonuses and the bestowal or withdrawal of plum assignments to keep things firmly in control. In the end, those tactics only succeeded in driving away the most accomplished workers.

On the other hand, working stiffs are reminded that there is real dignity and worth in whatever kind of work we do. There is a sacredness to our labor if we offer it, whatever it may be, to God. Journalist Judith Valente, in a recent book, celebrates the exploration of this idea among Jesuit thinkers, beginning with the poet and priest, Gerard Manly Hopkins. “Hopkins,” she writes, “good Jesuit that he was, firmly believed that all work, diligently and honestly performed, gives glory to God. Meditating on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, he wrote: “Smiting on an anvil, sawing a beam, whitewashing a wall, driving horses, sweeping, scouring, everything gives God some glory if being in his grace you do it as your duty. . . . To lift up the hands in prayer gives God glory, but a man with a dung fork in his hand, a woman with a slop pail, give him glory too. He is so great that all things give him glory if you mean they should.” Another great Jesuit thinker, Teilhard de Chardin, saw our work in the world as carrying on the work of creation. He wrote: “We may perhaps imagine that creation was finished long ago. But that would be quite wrong. It continues still more magnificently, and at the highest levels of the world. . . . We serve to complete it, even by the humblest work of our hands.””

Perhaps these thoughts show us the ultimate end of Paul's subversive idealism: that every man, woman and child has something unique and important to contribute to the building of the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community. If we consider how vital each one we encounter is to God's plan, how much God loves and values each human life, then perhaps it can be easier for us to truly live being subject to one another. It is not our place to dominate spouse, child, business associate or neighbor, any more than our loving Triune God dominates. We are called to love and to nurture, as God loves and nurtures. It is time for all of us to set aside petty considerations of who wears the pants in the family or who's got the biggest turf at work. There is much more important work for us to do, as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote. It is in our hands, for we are the Body of Christ on Earth, to continue the work of Jesus, to reconcile all humankind and all Creation to the Creator, to love each one we come in contact with, and to reveal to them the love of Jesus and their own potential. May we be open to the strength and power of God in our lives that manifests in self-giving love.