

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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Sermon Regarding Ephesians 5:21ff

Back in 1997, The Rev. Dr. Frank Wade shared an anecdote in a sermon on today's Ephesians 5:21-33 that probably provided one of those rare occasions when every priest in the Episcopal Church, if they read it, would have been nodding their heads together in agreement. He said, "In the marriage service in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, there is a list of lessons that is suggested for reading during the wedding. I usually ask couples to read those lessons and select the ones that mean the most to them for including in the service. Couples take the task on with varying degrees of enthusiasm and with different results. One thing that they almost all have in common, however, is that they never select the passage from Ephesians ~ the passage that happens to be our second lesson appointed for today. It is a fine text that makes some excellent points about relationships with Christ and with one another. The sentence that dooms its chances of being read in a modern wedding is this: "Wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord."

I can remember on my second election to General Convention in 2000 listening to the same Fr Frank Wade, as he had been appointed as chaplain to the House of Deputies. Sitting at our San Joaquin deputation table I listened like everyone else did in rapt attention to his morning and afternoon reflections. I envied his ability, perhaps it was a gift, of providing short reflections given with quite a bit of personal and wise reflection. And just like most clergy who would have read his sermon, he had most of the 900 diocesan deputies nodding their heads. He touched so many hearts and minds that he even got a book deal out of it, a collection of all his reflections during those 10 days. He got appointed as one of the house chaplains again in 2009, and subsequently had many of his parish sermons published. Pretty amazing. And that's how I found and read his sermon on this topic.

He went on to explain in his sermons why couples – and I have to say most Episcopal clergy - wouldn't want today's epistle to be read at their wedding. It is because that passage manages to push personal, emotional, and historical buttons all at once. It is viewed by the majority of those in our Protestant main line denominations as terribly sexist on the part of St. Paul, and, as well, St Paul is condemned by many to be an enemy of women and a male chauvinist pig of the very first order. In his most wise and pastoral way, understanding and validating people's feelings and responses, Fr. Wade shared that that reaction to hearing these words in Ephesians is understandable and [that reaction] needs to be appreciated. But then, he said, "This [aforementioned judgment] is not very fair to Paul or to the text." In a line that would make the greatest detractor of St Paul laugh even if uncomfortably, Fr Frank said, "Some very important babies are being thrown out with the bath water of the common reaction to those words."

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This was risky on his part. Having affirmed St Paul, Fr. Wade would almost be drawn and quartered by many in the church to get him to not provide any sympathy to St Paul at all. That's because so many clergy and lay people actually believe that St Paul was in fact a terrible sexist, a chauvinist pig of the first order, and an enemy of women. I am always amazed at those who feel that way, mainly out of context, and then will champion the phrase used at the entrance of our baptismal liturgy:

5 [one Lord, one faith, one baptism](#); **6** one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all", written by Paul. and then as Paul continues that phrase, "Now to each one of us grace has been given according to the measure of the gift of Christ," These same detractors would champion this because it ultimately uplifts the ministries of both men and women, straight out of the first century early church, and yet, is Paul here invisible? AND I might add written only a few paragraphs earlier than when St. Paul wrote what we heard read today. Still more, it was this same Apostle Paul who wrote in his letter to the Galatians, "...There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ..." I have to wonder aloud if the people who condemn Paul for being a chauvinist pig even read the bible close enough to realize that Paul, inspired by the same Holy Spirit, wrote these equalizing phrases regarding women.

Well, they are making the opposite end of spectrum mistake that got us into this kind of dismissal of women in the first place. These kinds of highly misinformed and empty epitaphs on both ends of the spectrum are knee jerk reactions that have no place in serious, critical biblical study and teaching. I'm not saying it's always easy to correctly read and study the Bible. But this mistake regarding impressions of Paul is fixable. By God's grace, and by his leading, and through right reading, we are able to NOT throw the baby out with the bath water, or as Fr. Wade said with his given grace - SOME very important babies (plural) thrown out with the bath water.

Here is a very important aspect of what we could say today is the first principle in bible study. That principle is context. Please be aware that "context" is not an excuse for minimizing, compromising, justifying or side-stepping. Look, I just gave you a huge example of what context should mean in bible study. I've brought to your attention one phrase from Ephesians 5 – noted from our anecdote that this can be subversely minimized to the one word "SUBMIT", but to do so ignoring the sentence just before it, and ignoring the sentence after it, and ignoring the amazing description symbolizing and comparing marriage between husband and wife to the relationship of Christ to His Bride, the Body of Christ, the Church. As well, NOT taking into consideration the other verses I read to you from other places in Paul's writing. And such ignorance is the argument for us to not ignore the importance and meaning of context. Context often provides meaning where no meaning is immediately decipherable. Context expands meaning when an expansion, or fleshing out, is most helpful. You hear me doing that for you in other sermons. Context helps us not only understand the author, and what the author is trying to say in HIS context, but it also helps us to better translate head-scratching

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words and phrases into OUR cultural and linguistic context that are otherwise translated too literalistically.

There's an old phrase that basically comes from the bible in various places, and was given much energy and emphasis during the Reformation, as the Bible was finally put into the hands of the faithful in the pew, but who were generally not trained for critical bible studying. That is, the bible interprets the bible. And thus, the bible itself, being thoroughly read, and taken as a whole can be context in and of itself, thus assisting the faithful to both read properly, and then listen to the Church's teachers and preachers.

So, briefly, that is the first principle, in all these things we must know what the writer is trying to say.

Now, when we apply this first principle of context, we find that this passage from Ephesians had a very different meaning to Paul and to the people in Ephesus than it does to us. What sounds so reactionary to many modern ears was in fact quite a liberal statement in its own time, and by liberal I mean subversive to what would be the Roman Empire status quo of empire conservation. Women in Paul's day – apart from the teaching of much of the Old Testament, and very clearly apart from the teaching of Jesus Christ, and the case is being made here apart from the holy teaching of the apostles -- women in Paul's day could be seen as property ~ they were baby machines and home support for male centered economic enterprises. We know also, tragically sometimes, that is an attitude not limited to the Roman Empire of 2000 years ago, as most of us are aware of that attitude found in current societies where children, especially girls, are expendable, where women are expected to be subverted, and intentional population limitations exist, such as in similar attitudes in China, even if lesser now than 20 years ago.

Listen in then in this Christian context of dealing with women: Paul is urging husbands and wives to be subject to one another. That is how the passage from Ephesians begins really begins. But it goes by so fast all we hear is the troublesome sentence. To be subject to one another. And that's what it is really about. Everyone has their role. But Paul is saying that – with this incredible symbol of Christ and his Church – that Jesus-following husband should also be subject to his wife. To love their wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself for her. And even more, in that relationship of mutual submission -- the Christian theological foundation now becomes clear --- because they both have the mind of Christ, and they both are temples of the Holy Spirit. And further, given the illustration that follows there is the theology of the sacrifice of the male Christ built right into the gender that tends to be overlord, listen – it is the husband who is to see his relationship with his wife as the one he must be willing to sacrifice himself for. Just like Jesus, as the husband, gave his very life for the sake of this wife, the Body of Christ. Why else would Paul go on -- look! this is context we're doing – why else would Paul go on to say love your wife as your own body. And of course, in mutual submission, the wife is to love her husband as her own body. Wow! In that day ~ what an incredible idea! What an incredible teaching. And mind you, these were not suggestions by marriage counselor Paul, these were imperative teachings. Very cutting edge. Very creative, avant-garde, very

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challenging to the system. Jesus wouldn't think they were avant-garde to the Kingdom of God, you know. But Paul followed the lead of Jesus, and so this very world-has-turned-upside-down attitude toward women, and marriage.

And what happens, from Paul's perspective and teaching and Holy Spirit inspiration if this holy relationship of mutual submission is not followed? Then comes the demise of the children, and of the fabric of the fellowship, and the end of relationships. The contextual teaching from the scripture includes the teaching that a husband and wife who pray together get their prayers answered. If they pray only separately, then their prayers, even if the same, will not have the same power. This is where mutual and mutuality has its deep power and profoundness.

I have so much more to say about the power available to mutual subjection and submission, and how much of a priority it is for the Enemy to deride and degrade Christian marriages. I'll have to do that another time.

But I do want to share one more thing Fr Frank said which caught me off guard.

He said, of course, that if we think there are supposed to be winners and losers in a conflict of domination and control then we fail most of all Paul's call to be subject to one another. But counter-intuitively he said, "Make no mistake about it, being subject to one another is simply about how we go about disagreeing. When people agree on something there is no question of being subject. It is in our disagreements that we raise the question of how to be subject to one another. It is our good disagreements that make marriage worthwhile. Many marriages struggle and fail because people do not know how to disagree in a good way. If you are in a marriage, a serious relationship of family, a committed friendship, then you know how important it is to disagree well." Well, Amen to that.

Paul's words may sound dated, but their message is true to God's word and mission, and thus as current as the next conversation you have with someone you love.

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