

Christianity was a Family Affair

(Acts 16: 22-34; Ephesians 5: 21-6: 4; Psalm 67; John 13: 31-35)

Our Scripture lessons this morning set before us three pivotal defining moments in the life of the earliest Church that grew directly out of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Gospel lesson recalls that “new commandment” given by Jesus to his disciples during their last meal together. That command was to love each other in the same way Jesus had just demonstrated, in that ultimate act of submission, which was the washing of the feet of each of his disciples.

In the lesson from the Acts of the Apostles, the early Church recalls a time when it became clear to Paul and his associates that the great love at the core of their faith would no longer be confined within the group that happened to come to Christian faith by way of Jewish roots, but rather would be opened up to the Gentile or non-Jewish world, and also that the basic unit of this new faith would be the *family* or *household* of the believer. And then, in Paul’s letter to the Church in Ephesus, we heard that command about self-giving *servant* love spelled out expressly in the context of daily family relationships, and expressly for the benefit of those non-Jewish Christians who would have had a very different perspective on family and social relationships.

It’s in the new commandment of Jesus to love one another, first, foremost and above all else, that the real heart of Christian faith is expressed. There’s nothing new or shocking in that. But I would suggest that, in exactly the same way, it’s in Paul’s *application* of that command right into *family* relationships, that this heart of Christian faith grows *exponentially*, and the secret of the Church’s survival through history is revealed. Now, *that* statement *may* be a little strange and shocking, and it will need to be carefully unpacked.

First of all, we need to examine not just *what* Paul says, but *how* he says it. Note carefully that Paul begins with a command patterned exactly on that of Jesus. The original command, to “love one another”, is reworked *slightly* by Paul into the idea that we must “submit to one another out of love”, and again it’s all on the *pattern* of *Christ’s* love for us. This is Paul’s introduction to the paragraph that follows. It’s the thesis statement for his whole argument. Even though almost all English translations will place the statement at the end of the *previous* paragraph, that’s not accurate.

As an erstwhile teacher of biblical Greek, I have a major bone to pick with any editor or publication committee who separates the statement about “submitting to each other” from the paragraph that follows, where the discussion is about husbands and wives and children and household slaves. Although it’s true that the early Greek manuscripts did not include very much punctuation and did not follow a clear paragraph format, it’s also true that translators and editors of the text have always supplied these tools for us, and often quite *imaginatively*, which is to say, with evident bias.

Here’s what happens in an English translation if Paul’s command to “submit to one another” is set *apart* from the discussion that follows: Paul’s command, which is notably egalitarian, perfectly fair and on level ground, seems then *not* to apply to the examples of marriage relationships, parent-child or master-servant relationships which, in the first century (and far too often today) were seen as manifestly

vertical in nature and hierarchic in authority. But what do *you* feel that Paul is saying here? That our faith-relationships have no bearing on our daily life and human relationships? Or is he suggesting, in a very new, radical and possibly explosive way, that *all* our relationships—marital, parental and social—need to be patterned on our relationship with Christ through faith?

Another thing that happens when the statement about “submitting to each other” is set apart from what follows is that the next three or four statements have no verb! It’s a horrible pile-up of nouns, adjectives and phrases without a single verb to give them direction or sense! The verb was back there in the action of submitting, one to another. Paul was far too at home in speaking and writing Greek to make a schoolboy mistake like that!

Now back to the text, let me give you a different and possibly better *translation* for Paul’s idea of “submitting” to one another. Even though the “submitting” is perfectly balanced and two-directional in Paul’s statement, modern readers are probably still a little hyper-sensitive to the vertical or political flavour of “submitting” to anyone. The Greek phrase Paul uses, I would translate like this: “Be *respectful* and *supportive* of one another.” Notice that there’s no reference to authority here, in the sense of who has *more*, nor is there any suggestion as to which partner ought to submit *first*. Eugene Peterson, in *his* paraphrase, uses another similar expression, “Be courteously reverent to one another.” Either way, the idea is to be supportive of each other on a mutual basis, in response to Christ’s example to us.

When we begin to look at Paul’s detailed instructions and how he spells out the overall command, we may have to make some allowance for viewpoint and perspective. It’s a little like the fellow who was in a minor car accident, but was knocked out briefly when his head hit the steering wheel. When he woke up on the pavement, blurry and confused, with a crowd standing around and a paramedic bending over, the victim looked around and then began screaming. The paramedic couldn’t find where it hurt, so he told the man to point to it. The man pointed to the sign in front of the gas station where the accident had occurred. That sign happened to say “Shell”, but what the paramedic couldn’t see was that *his* head, from the victim’s perspective, had blocked out the letter “S”. So, perspective has a lot to do with it.

In similar fashion, it’s far too easy for modern readers to be critical of the fact that Paul seems to aim his comments about submitting firstly at *women*, while the husband’s authority might appear to be both assumed and maintained throughout that discussion. It’s too easy, from *our* viewpoint, to write Paul off as a male chauvinist pig, hopelessly out of touch with the human situation and the rights of the individual. From Paul’s own perspective, however, things may look a little different.

We need to look more closely at the cultural background upon which Paul gave his advice. No matter where he traveled in his missionary journeys, Paul was constantly in touch with three basic cultural groups. First, he was in constant contact with the Jewish culture, partly because this was his own native culture, and partly because he always sought out the local Jewish synagogue in each city he visited. Now, in the Jewish culture, even though the family unit was strong and children were genuinely cherished, the women had no *legal rights* whatever. They had no status in the synagogue. In

their own courts they were treated, not as persons but *property*. Jewish wives could be divorced simply by writing a note to that effect and having it witnessed. And the cardinal function of women in Jewish culture was to produce sons—not just children, but sons.

In the Greek culture, in which Paul also had some native roots, the mother in the household may have enjoyed some degree of status, if only as chief domestic administrator, but she had no claim or control or authority over the head of the household. In reality, her legal status and day-to-day treatment were not much better than that of a household slave.

Finally, in the Roman culture that Paul also encountered, the family unit was generally in chaos by the first century. The divorce rate in most Roman cities was far in excess of 50 percent. In the ancient civic records of Pompeii, there is a notation concerning a woman who was married to her twenty-third husband, and she herself was his twenty-first wife! Not only was the marriage relationship in chaos, the husband possessed under Roman law absolute power, including the power of life or death, over anyone within the household. Any challenge to his authority, however small, could be met with swift and harsh punishment.

Although each cultural group had its own distinct variations, for mothers and children throughout the ancient world, the family was an institution in which they had no say, no power, no rights and often no love. And when you consider Paul's advice on this background, that husbands and wives ought to behave and work together in a mutually supportive and respectful arrangement, you catch a glimpse of something surprisingly new and revolutionary, and you might even begin to see in Paul, rather than the misogynist so many have made him out to be, as something at least vaguely resembling a freedom-fighter on the *home* front. Even more shocking was Paul's comparison of family relationships to the relationship between Christ and his Church—a comparison that elevates the family to the level of holiness and opens the family to the presence of Christ.

From this fresh perspective, listen again to Paul's advice (with my italics added): husbands *and* wives, parents *and* children, respect and support *each other* because of your reverence for Christ and *his* love for you. Give in to each other, not in slave-like subservience or passive weakness or in fear of confrontation, but simply because of the confidence and strength you have from the leading of Christ in your life and from the power of believing in him. Instead of confronting each other or taking advantage of each other, give to each other the patience, the kindness and the courage that Christ gives to his Church.

At the same time that Paul is giving this advice, writing it down and passing it around to the churches he founded, already *in practice* the early church is building on the family unit. The early church is worshipping in family *homes*, including entire households in the practice of baptism and almost certainly including children in the sacramental meal. Very quickly this became a defining trait of the Christians over against any of the other pagan religions: that Christianity was not just for adults who were fortunate enough to be males, or that women and children could be included but just for shameful purposes, as was often the case in other religions at the time. Building on the family unit was the key

thing that really built the Christian church. And this, in turn, was what enabled the church to survive—and even grow stronger—through terrible periods of persecution. It's the fact that Christian faith really did have the family unit as its *basic* unit that allowed the church to carry right on even if a whole generation were suddenly removed. And that fact generates a pretty powerful confidence, doesn't it?

It occurs to me that where the church in today's world is alive and growing, strong and confident, the *family* is still the most basic unit of the church and its witness. And where the church is perhaps not so strong or confident, in the Western world for example, it appears to me that the basic unit of faith is more often *the individual*. It's in the West that the tendency has been strongest to make the Christian faith an individual matter, a purely private thing. It's in the Western world where you're most likely to hear Christians saying, "My faith is what I choose to believe or not, it's whatever I feel is right for me, whatever I'm comfortable with—it's a private thing, between me and God, and no one else needs to know."

I think all of Christian history speaks against that view. Our Christian faith does not and cannot exist in isolation. To be sure, it may begin with an intensely personal experience. Paul would probably agree with that. But that personal experience, no matter how intense or ground shaking, is only ever the *beginning* of faith. To attain maturity, our faith has to grow outwards, on the *horizontal* plane, and it has to reach and touch the people you reach and touch. Christian faith is never just for individuals in isolation. At its minimal basic unit, it's for *families*, and then it extends outward from there. You can't successfully confine Christian faith to the strictly personal or private level—at least, not without turning it into something else, not without choking the life and the love right out of it.

Right from the beginning, Christian faith *was* a family affair. It survived the toughest challenges and threats when and where it *remained* a family affair. Where Christian faith has a strong and confident future, it *will remain* a family affair. And for us in the present, where our confidence may be a little weaker and faith more tightly guarded or closeted, it's pretty clear where the growth and development need to occur. If Christian faith, worship and witness *was* a family affair right from the beginning, what makes us think we can change it now?

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