

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 16
The Rev. Patricia Millard

8-27-06

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-25

Ephesians 5:21-33

John 6:60-69

Sometimes the best place to start is by stating the obvious, and simply naming the elephant in the room. The reading out of Ephesians this morning is a difficult text: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ... wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.”

And although at this point in the sermon I may be speaking more to the women than to the men, I myself am keenly aware of how I get stuck at the words: “wives, be subject to your husbands.” It has been difficult, to say the least, for me to discern whether this particular text has anything to say to me. And I would add that the difficulty is not resolved by platitudes such as “but look at how the husbands are asked to love, which is even harder”, because the root of the problem that these texts have for me is precisely the fact that men and women are addressed in qualitatively different ways, and I cannot but question the fact that the most the Gospel seems to ask from a women in a marriage is her obedience, even as the husband is asked to give his love.

Generalizing now to all of us, I would say that one of the reasons why we find these texts “difficult” in this part of Christ’s Body which is St. Wilfrid’s Episcopal Church, is that there are two commitments that we hold dearly. First, we are a community that takes the authority of the Bible seriously. We believe that the Bible truly has something to say about God, and we ascribe to this text an authority to guide and shape and direct our lives. If we didn’t have that commitment, this text wouldn’t be a problem. I think of friends I have who left the Christian church years ago. And this text is simply not a problem anymore, because the Bible has no authority for them.

But the other side of the coin is that we are a community that is not really formed around reading the text literally or simplistically, and we wrestle with that. In my own life, for example, I am reminded of an experience that I had when I was in Seminary, when several of us attended a conference called “Seminarrians Interacting.” It was all about bringing together a group of faculty and seminarrians from really different seminaries and traditions, including different Christian denominations, as well as Jewish seminarrians

from the Jewish Seminary in Los Angeles. Those of us from the Episcopal Seminary quickly realized that it was easier for us to dialog with the Jewish seminarians than it was for us to dialog with seminarians from the more conservative Christian churches. I'm sure we were a challenge to them as well! But I remember very clearly this conversation with one of their faculty members, a man who told me one evening, in a gentle but point-blank kind of way, that he simply could not accept my sense of vocation. He based his reasoning on biblical texts, mostly from the letters of Paul [1 Corinthians 14:31 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12]. I remember vividly my own frustration, because there was no way for me to respond "in kind." Even now, my sense of how we interpret the Bible is not something I can put into a couple of carefully crafted sentences with a couple of "choice" biblical quotations at the end!

For the truth is that we are not a community that is formed around reading the text literally or simplistically, and therefore we cannot but wrestle with what we do in our reading of the Bible. In a sense, I am glad that this text came up today, because it gives us an opportunity to answer the question: "How do we take a text like Ephesians and read it faithfully, given who we are here in the Episcopal Church?"

The first thing I would say to that, is that we have an ample and generous permission to come to the text and read it and react to it however we want. It is perfectly fine to say: "I have problems with this text and I see some things as a woman that bother me." The Bible is full of passages that can present challenges to us. The good news is that there is no question or issue that God can't handle. The first step in faithful reading is often this naming our difficulties with a text, and that is OK. We don't have to stuff that or pretend they're not there.

The second thing is that we need to remember that we have all inherited an unfortunate tradition, and that is the fact that all of us in this room are the product of the modern era. All of us have been formed making the assumption that things are literal and understandable and in the big historical quest for where do we find the authority of the sacred, we are the product of the Reformation: *Sola Scriptura, Scriptura Sola*. The basic and only authority is the Bible itself. But often, as "moderns", we come to the biblical text with as much nuance and sophistication as if the biblical text were on the same level as the instructions for a new washing machine. We forget that the Bible is a compilation many different texts that have been translated,

retranslated, compiled, recompiled, edited and re-edited over thousand of years. It is a collection that covers all kinds of different literary genres.

And most of us don't even know how to read poetry anymore! Most of us have been trained with a scientific viewpoint, and it is difficult for us to even begin to appreciate some of the complexities of literature and language. Furthermore, the texts were written in times that made incredibly different cultural and historical and linguistic and social assumptions. It is naïve to think that I can be unaware of my own context, and unaware of the biblical context, and read the Bible "literally," and from that "literal reading" come to a faithful understanding of what is meant.

So when we come to a text like Ephesians, maybe we need to do some work in order to understand the text a little better. Right off, one of the things that I would recommend is to be careful about what version or edition of the Bible we purchase. There is already a level of interpretation in things such as the comments at the bottom, the introduction to each book, and the headings of chapters. There are incredibly complex issues that have to do with the way the Greek and Hebrew text is translated into English. EVERY Bible is ALREADY an "interpretation" - and some are definitely better than others. If you are asking: "What is a good Bible for me to read?" I would recommend The New Interpreter's Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha. This is, hands down, the best Bible edition that I have ever come across. It asks faithful, provocative questions, and answers them in ways that work for us and for who we are.

Looking into that, and going back to the Ephesians passage, we could then proceed to ask ourselves, or to remember, the whole very painful and convoluted history of the way in which women have been viewed in cultures all across history and all over the world. We need to remember that, for thousands of years, most cultures have viewed women as being, not only inferior to men, but as qualitatively different from men. We need to remember that women have been treated as property, that women have been used, (and often discarded) as objects in the stories of men. All of our historical contexts are extraordinarily colored by this patriarchal and hierarchical overlay. Today, we might be one of the first generations that has been able to say, clearly, that

the nature, the worth, the skills and the experience of women
are fully equal,
fully equivalent,

and as holy and as good and as rational
and as everything else,
as those of men.

The very saying of this is the working of the Spirit in our own time, something that the Spirit has said well, and we can hold this knowledge, and we can claim it, and we can even it in conversation with the biblical text, as balance, as counterpoint, as part of a faithful engagement, conversation and dialogue.

We can also look to Jesus. We can look at the way in which Jesus reacted and responded to women and realize that Jesus was a radical feminist for his time. In the gospel narrative, Jesus was always close to women, and women were close to Jesus. And furthermore, some of the most interesting, faithful examples of discipleship in the gospel narrative are precisely the responses of the women. [In the Gospel of Matthew, see for example 9:20, 15:22-28, 26:7-13]

Turning back to Ephesians, it is not clear whether Ephesians was written by Paul himself, late in his life or whether Ephesians was written after Paul's time, and then attributed to Paul. But in any case, Ephesians seems to address a context in which some of the initial sense of "the freedom we have in Christ" [Gal. 5:1, 5:13, and 3:28] was changing, and the Christian community was feeling a need to make itself more "socially acceptable" and re-conform itself the social mores of the times. In terms of its literary form, Ephesians is in conversation with "household codes," which were writings that basically said something like: "Given our understanding of what the universe is like, this is the way in which the family and society should be organized."

Essentially, Paul, (or a community that hearkened to Paul) is asking the following question: "What does it mean for us to be in community, and how do we organize our lives and relationships, given the reality of the Christ amongst us. Given the reality of what has happened to us in Christ, how are we to live and relate to each other."

An interesting thing here is that, if we look at this reading through the lens of the time - a culture where women could be divorced with no more than a sentence or two, a culture in which women were treated as objects - these statements in Ephesians that affirm the importance of marriage, that assert

that women are not throw-away things, and that bound husbands to love their wives... these statements were actually very radical claims, and were very affirming of women. Women were not “objects,” but rather partners in a marriage, and husbands were to “love” them. And if we look at that text in terms of what it said about marriage, instead of denigrating marriage, Paul used it as a metaphor for something that was very important to that community: how do we understand the relationship between Christ and his church, between Christ and God’s people. Ephesians, at its heart, addresses the whole subject of how relationships are deepened and transformed when a people, in Christ, comes together as “church.”

Now, all of that said, there are still problems with the text, because Ephesians still uses the language of domination, submission and subjugation to talk about relationships, and the world-view of Ephesians still assumes that there are qualitative differences between women and men.

But if we choose to remove this overlay, if we choose to re-phrase the question through the lens of God-given equality, we are left with statements that are equally challenging, and incredibly compelling.

There IS something important in this text. What does this text suggest in terms of ALL of our relationships? In terms of all of the different ways in which we live in partnership with each other. Women and men, gay couples, Lesbian couples, single or partnered: what does it mean to live in partnership with each other? How do we live in relationship with each other as the Body of Christ? In a culture that is the most individualistically oriented culture in the world, what does it mean to have a text that says: “Because of what Christ has done, how are we to treat each other?” The answer is an invitation to be extraordinarily committed to each other, even when the going gets hard. The answer is a reminder that when we come through difficult eras or stages in our relationships, our partnerships, our marriages, we are to look to each other, relate to each other, as Christ, in love and service and giving up of self. The Gospel still makes a radical claim: there are no throw away people in our lives or in our communities.

If you look at our community within the church, for example, this is a poignant reminder that it is more important for us to be together and to care and love for each other than it is for us to be apart; a reminder that when we come into relationship, we are vowed and bound to each other in complex ways, because of the grace of Christ.

So when all is said and done, this is still a difficult text, but it “difficult” because it sets a very high, challenging “bar” for the way that we live in relationship, it still makes a demand that incredibly counter-cultural. In a sense we can connect it with our first reading from Joshua: As Christians, we have made a choice. We are choosing to live a very counter-cultural life, because of who we are in Christ, and it is difficult and challenging and yet it is also incredibly life giving and exciting as well.

Finally, we come to our Gospel text, and again find a connection. Why do we make these commitments as Christians? Perhaps, because in our experience, in our spiritual journey, we have met the Christ, and along with Simon Peter, we look at Jesus in the eye and we say: “I know that this teaching is difficult, but I know you, and where else could I go? For I know that you are the Holy one and the Son of God.”

Ultimately it is only because of our relationship with Christ that we can ever have the wherewithal and the courage to see the Christ in each other, and reorganize our relationships and our communities in this challenging way that is knit around a deep, committed, sacrificial, serving love to those in whose company we become “the church,” the Body of Christ.