

August 16, 2015
TEXT: Ephesians 5:15–33
TITLE: Loving Values

I meet with all couples before officiating at their weddings—same gender or different gender couples alike. In these premarital sessions we will usually talk about their dating history, their family histories, their approaches to conflict, finances and faith, and other topics. At some point, we will discuss the marriage ceremony itself and quite often someone will ask, “So is the word ‘obey’ still in the marriage vows?” We’ll chuckle for a moment and then someone, often the wife, will say, “No, seriously, is that word still in there? Because I’m not going to say that unless he says it too.” Let’s set the record straight. The word “obey” is not in the Presbyterian marriage vows. Going back in history, the word “obey” isn’t in the Catholic marriage vows either. It first appeared in the Church of England Book of Common Prayer in 1549 – where it remained until women’s rights activists got it removed around 1934.

The old vows used to have the husbands promise to love and cherish their wives, while the wives promised to love, cherish and obey their husbands. Part of the reason for this gender imbalance can be traced to our reading from Ephesians 5. Although the passage doesn’t use the word “obey,” the King James Version of verse 22 says, “wives, submit to your husbands.” The New Revised Standard Version slightly softens that to say “wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.” There is no getting around the fact that this wording feels awkward, if not outright oppressive. So what are we to do with this passage found in the New Testament of our bible?

That’s an important question for us to consider, because there are lots of parts of the bible that are uncomfortable, scripture that feels dated or overly violent or just plain wrong given what we know about the world today. Yet it feels disingenuous to pick and choose what parts of the bible we will actually follow. Can you imagine Moses standing on Mount Sinai asking God to edit out a few of the 10 commandments? So what are we to do when the preacher decides to expand the lectionary reading and we hear not only Ephesians 5:15-20 but also vss. 21-33?

Well, you can avoid the passage altogether. If we were a strict lectionary-based church, you’d never hear the verses about wives being subject to their husbands because that passage is not included in the three-year cycle of Sunday readings. A second option is to go ahead and read the passage but then start playing word games with it. I could try and convince you that “wives being subject to their husbands” is a benign, little thing you shouldn’t worry about. I could talk about the Greek verb used here—*phoberos*—and how it means “to show respect and reverence for,” not “be weak and submissive to.” But that linguistic approach feels like academic gymnastics and it doesn’t change the fact that half the congregation is glaring at me because I raised this whole subject.

Another preaching option is to pass the buck and say that the author of Ephesians got this specific material from the Roman and Greek culture of that day and age. Famous teachers like Plato, Aristotle, and Plutarch taught moral codes about how households should function—how wives and husbands, parents and children, slaves and masters should treat one another. Now, since that day and age was patriarchal and male-biased, of course their moral codes are rife with patriarchal language—so they're to blame for this awkward passage. A fourth option is to tell you that the passage is just plain wrong. When Nazi Germany was sending Jews, gays, gypsies and others to concentration camps, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other church leaders argued that the language of Romans 13 (in which it says "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities") was wrong advice for that time in history. Likewise, I could just argue that patriarchal language of wives being submissive to their husbands is bad advice for today given our awareness of spousal abuse, domestic violence, and so-called "honor killings" around the world.

So the truth is I might use all four options to handle this troubling passage. I could avoid reading it in church - soften its harsh edges by redefining the words it uses - blame much of its sting on the patriarchal language from 2000 years ago - and I'd question its accuracy in a world already rife with violence against women. But since I've opened this can of worms, I want to do more than dodge the complexities of this passage. Let's face it: there are some hard passages in the bible. Both liberals and conservatives are guilty of picking and choosing which parts of scripture we really want to focus on—liberals looking for words about love and justice, conservatives keen on language about purity and personal righteousness. But there is value in wrestling with this passage, like Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord. Christ died to take away our sins, not our minds, and there is much to be gained if we will wrestle with this section of Ephesians.

Verses 21–33 talk about marriage, and as any of you know who have been in long, committed relationships, it is hard to capture these relationships in words. We pile up adjectives and nouns to describe what marriage is—love, trust, passion, laughter, joy, commitment, struggles, friendship, mutuality - with not every word equally applicable on a given day. Garrison Keillor has said that "Marriage is the true test of character because you are making a good life with your best critic. You will have many critics, but your spouse is by far the best informed of all of them." Marriage is complex—it is dynamic, not static—it is both commonplace and yet unique for every couple. It is meant to be a coming together for mutual benefit and mutual nurture in ways that unfold during the various seasons of one's life.

If we're honest, all relationships require a degree of submission, of being subject to one another. We have our own wants, desires, our own thoughts about how things ought to be—but in a covenantal relationship, we see those desires in light of someone else's needs, wants and desires. Often we do humble ourselves—

husbands to wives, wives to husbands, parents to children. We still possess a sense of self-love and pride that knows when others are belittling us, demeaning or abusing us and we rightfully reject any such behavior. Yet at the same time we hold within our emotional reserves the capacity to step away from our own needs and humble ourselves so that someone else may be encouraged, cared for, supported in their career, nursed back to health, comforted in loss, or loved as a life partner and soul-mate and friend.

It is hard to capture this quality in words. In the movie Annie Hall, Woody Allen is walking beside Diane Keaton and she says that she loves him and asks him if he loves her. To which Allen's character replies, "Love is too weak a word for what I feel. I luurve you, I loave you, I luff you, two F's. I have to invent words to describe what I feel." I can't put into simple words what the formula is for a successful, mutual marriage. But verses 21 and 32 come close, so listen to them again: *Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ... This is a great mystery, and [it reflects, can also be applied] to Christ and the church.* There is a depth to marital love that is mysterious and hard to describe; but if we don't at least try, how can we expect our children to understand what marriage is about? The bottom line is this: Marriage is a choice and a covenant you affirm on a day-to-day basis. You wake up and decide to be married that day; you decide to be a parent that day, to be a Christian, a moral person, not to be an addict, not to be self-destructive, but to live by faith and honor your commitments that day. The beauty is that you never make those decisions alone. Before you opened your eyes, Christ was already there, by grace, supporting you in those decisions. Yes, it is a great and wonderful mystery.

I'll make one other point before closing. The bible needs to be read in long chunks, not dissected into short quotes and isolated verses. So before we read about husbands and wives being subject to one another, we read these words of advice: *Be careful how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time [you have]. Don't be foolish, instead understand the will of the Lord. Don't get drunk, filled with wine, but be filled with the Spirit. Sing songs and hymns, give thanks to God at all times.* And then comes vs. 21—*Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.* That verse sits as a hinge between the two paragraphs. It asks us to be subject to one another as Christians in a church, as Christians living in a troubled and hurting world - and to be subject to one another in our homes, in our relationships.

The bible's advice about marriage is all part of the bible's advice about life in the world—a world created by God, a world troubled by sin and brokenness, injustice, violence and abuse, a world loved and redeemed by Christ, a world being transformed by the Holy Spirit, a world made new each day even as we groan and await a time of final healing and joy. Ephesians 5 touches on this good news, with stumbling language shaped by that day and age, and it names a virtue of respect and humility after the example of Christ. On other Sundays we will read passages about how to live together: passages about mutuality -

Galatians 3—In Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; passages about faithfulness—Philippians 2—Let the same mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus; passages about humility—Matthew 11—Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Taken together they offer us words of life, so that we can be careful how we live... and so that we can humbly make the most of the time given us, and make the most of the relationships we are a part of. All of them. Thanks be to God.

AMEN