

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS”    21<sup>ST</sup>. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME    B  
Joshua 24: 1-2a, 15-17, 18b    Psalm 34    Ephesians 5:21-32    John 6: 60-69  
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

“Wives should be subordinate to their husbands.” As we would say in my old Brooklyn neighborhood, the second reading is “a beaut.” It is offensive to modern ears, and the preacher has to consider the options. You could be in touch with your liturgical planners and have them choose the shorter version of the reading that omits the offensive language. But how can you not address the reading? Even skipping the awkward parts may not be a solution, people know it’s “in Paul somewhere.” This might be a chance to wrestle with an offensive text; people will appreciate the attempt. If it is read, it will not go unnoticed. I have always wondered, as I watch trial scenes in movies, about a judge’s admonition to a jury, “The jury should ignore what you just heard from the witness.” How do you do that? How do women ignore what they just heard? And if they can, what does that suggest about the scriptures? Skip over the ones you don’t like?... Pretend they are not there? We have become aware of the implications of such “submissive language”----it rings of patriarchy; it leaves open a pathological “reason” for abuse. Submission language turns the modern hearer cold, or livid with rage, or disconcerted by painful memory.

Paul (the authorship of this epistle is in dispute) is working with the cultural setting of his day. The “household codes” of the time form the background for the message of this section of the epistle. These codes, going back to the Greeks, were based on hierarchal ranking—wives were submissive to their husbands, children to parents, slaves to owners, etc. In the light of these arrangements and using them as a jumping-off place, the epistle is suggesting, as it says in the opening lines in today’s reading, that Christians should be “subordinate to another out of reverence to Christ (another translation has, “defer to one another....”). But the analogy is unfortunate, it is hard for us to suspend judgement and to see the cultural reality of the day as only a way of getting to another point the author is trying to make about Christian behavior in general.

It is hard to find a lot that sounds like good news in this passage. Some think this section was written not by Paul, but by a disciple of his who drew on Paul’s theology for the epistle but also added his own material----such as today’s

additions. Maybe in our preaching we need to balance this reading by looking at what Paul says about the equality of all people, “There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or free person, male or female” (Gal. 3:28). This latter quote is more solid in the Pauline corpus, with less ambiguity of authorship. It also better reflects Paul’s thought about all people having equal standing before God, whether or not they observe the Mosaic law, or are Jew, Gentile, slave, free, men or women—we are all on equal footing and paths as we journey with one another through faith in Christ. All, through faith in Christ, are truly descendants of Abraham.

Some would soften this part of Ephesians by saying this teaching was necessary because of the anti-Christian setting in which the early church found itself. A teaching of subordination of wives to husbands would be more in accord with the surrounding societal norms and help reduce for Christians the hostility of their neighbors. Not a solid argument since Christians were not known to subvert other teaching for the sake of how they would be received by their neighbors.

Carrol, StuhlmueLLer, C.P., commenting on this passage says:

The more pejorative words about women in the Pauline writings are later additions, inspired yes, but also not equal to the depth of insight normally associated with Paul. As today in official church teaching, or for that matter among the documents of Vatican II, some are more memorable or inspired than others. (BIBLICAL MEDITATIONS FOR ORDINARY TIME, WEEKS 10-22. New York: Paulist Press, 1984, page 382.)

StuhlmueLLer does think that Ephesians calls for a “renewal of marriage vows and for a new appreciation of its holiness....” The central message seems more to be about “deferring to one another out of reverence to Christ.” This would be a deference of all members of the church towards one another. Are we ready to accept the consequences of being a member of a Christian community, a church that asks of us a self-sacrificing love towards one another? And since the epistle calls both husband AND wife to love one another, “as Christ has loved the church,” this command is not just a “husband love.” So, are all those married ready to recommit themselves unselfishly to their spouses? Yes, there are sounds of male dominance in this reading, but this is undercut by the admonition to husbands “to love their wives as their own bodies.” It would seem that both wives and husbands are to give themselves in love and care for one another. This focuses the attention away from the sound of male dominance—or at least softens the

offending verses.

It is also possible that the surrounding cultural norms would have had the first mandate, about wives being submissive to their husbands. What would have been new and the Christian addition, was to remind husbands of the love and concern they were to have for their wives. In a culture where wives were property of their husbands, this would have been a real witness to the uniqueness of the Christian gospel.

Joshua puts a choice to the people: which god will they follow, the pagan gods of their ancestors or the God that gave them life and brought them out of slavery into the Promise Land? Jesus places a choice to his listeners today as well. Joshua asks the people to choose for God. Jesus places himself and his teaching before his hearers and gives them a choice—to see in him the Way to God, or to walk away. People make big and little decisions in their lives based on such fundamental beliefs.

In 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white person. This seamstress, on her way home from work, would not budge. Her act of defiance inspired the Montgomery bus boycott that lasted 13 months and within a year inspired 42 other protests against segregation. As famous as Martin Luther King Jr. became, Nelson Mandela said that before there was King there was Rosa Parks. When the Chinese student stood before the tanks in Tiananmen Square., Mandela called it a “Rosa Parks moment.”

Rosa Parks was a seamstress for most of her life, but she was also a devout Christian, a dedicated churchwoman who said, “God is everything to me.” It is not much of a stretch to suggest that it was her faith that gave the inspiration and the determination for her decision that day. She chose the way of freedom, the way offered by Joshua and Jesus. Both are asking us to make the same kind of statement with our lives and to back that statement up with the daily choices we make—the big ones and the small ones. These daily decisions may not be as momentous as Rosa Parks’ was that day, but they may feel that way for us. Behind the significant choices we make, about marriage, career, children, education, etc., is the basic choice we are being asked to consider or renew today. Either we commit ourselves to God’s ways or choose some other “god”—like ambition, greed, manipulation, dominance, fear, despair, etc.

## QUOTABLE:

Ephesians (5:21) begins with an instruction to be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ; and, of course, that affects husbands to wives, as well as wives to husbands.... the obligation of the husband to love is treated more extensively than the obligation of the wife to be subject and both are rooted in God's initial plan for union in marriage (5:31=Gen 2. 24).

----Raymond Brown, S.S. in, AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT. New York: Doubleday, 1997, page 624.

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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