

Betsey Moe
Sermon 1.4.09
“A Great Mystery”

Ephesians 5:21-33

21Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. 23For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. 24Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. 25Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, 27so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. 28In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, 30because we are members of his body. 31“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” 32This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. 33Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

I have a friend getting married in June. She is a person of deep Christian faith who intends to live the Christian life with her husband-to-be. When I told her I was preaching on the Ephesians passage this Sunday, (I said, “You know, the one about wives submit to your husbands, husbands love your wives, the husband is the head of the wife,”) she said, “Yeah, that is not one we would choose to have read at our wedding.” And they are not alone among Christian couples. Couples today are much more likely to choose 1 Corinthians 13 – “Love is patient, love is kind,” or Hezekiah 28 (There’s no such book as Hezekiah, but couples would choose that over Ephesians 5 if given a choice!) If people are not avoiding the passage, they’re radically re-interpreting it. In the movie, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, the daughter getting married says to her mom, “Ma, Dad is so stubborn. What he says goes. ‘Ah, the man is the head of the house!’” And her mother answers her, “Let me tell you something, Toula. The man is the head, but the woman is the neck. And she can turn the head any way she wants.” Is there a place for Ephesians 5 in a world in which marital roles are not as clear-cut as they were in the Apostle Paul’s time? Could there be wisdom in Ephesians 5 that is hard to hear in 2009?

I’d like to start by looking at the larger context of Ephesians. This is a letter in which Paul is practically breathless about the radical transformation Christ has brought to the world – what he calls the “mystery of God’s will.” If you were to read the first half of Ephesians, you would start to catch some of Paul’s excitement in his long sentences about the cosmic difference Christ has made. “In Christ,” he writes in chapter 1, “we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us” (1:7). Paul understands the Christ event to be so radical that Jews and Gentiles are brought together – united – in a “new humanity” (2:15). He goes on in chapter 3, “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the

fullness of God” (3:18-19). Paul cannot say enough – it is as if human language fails him – about God’s love for humanity.

And then come the “therefores.” “I, therefore, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love....” (4:1-2). In light of the fact that the creator of the universe has lavished love on us and included us as children of God, utter humility toward one another is our only proper response. We are to bear with one another, being patient and gentle. Which sets the stage for Ephesians 5, the marriage passage.

Paul begins it by saying, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” This mutual humility – a flexible give and take – is the key to the whole passage as well as to a life-giving marriage. Wives are to be subject to their husbands, as the Church (the people of God) is subject to Christ; husbands are to love their wives like Christ loved the church and gave his very life up for her. Paul believes that in the mysterious marriage relationship, when two become one flesh, men and women have a chance to understand *the* great mystery: that Christ has made possible a relationship between God and God’s people, the Church. As husbands and wives interact with each other in humility, *they* begin to understand the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ’s love.

The humility that Paul is talking about does not require either women or men to be doormats; he is calling for a humility that springs from being filled, made complete, in Christ. So a wife who shows humility toward her husband becomes more, not less, human. And a husband who loves his wife sacrificially becomes more, not less, human – just as Adam “lost” a rib, but still somehow ended up with all he needed. Humility that comes from fullness in Christ gives life to the other, and in turn, enlivens the relationship, making it a living witness of God’s love.

I know couples who tend to take Ephesians 5 more literally. The husband sees himself and the wife sees the husband as the “head of the household.” The husband serves his wife in Christ-like humility, and the wife serves her husband and defers to him for major decisions. Their households are peaceful and loving. I also know Christian couples who do not see one or the other to be the “head of the household” but share responsibilities and the task of decision-making according to each one’s gifts, and *their* households are peaceful and loving. The way both types of couples order their relationship is less important than the mutual humility they practice. These couples do not argue over who is the neck and who is the head because they know that that would be missing the point entirely.

As I have observed marriages in my family and in the church, I am aware that no marriage is perfect, but the humility practiced in some marriages has been particularly inspiring.

Bobby and Tina were married about five years ago. Both teachers, they share a love of reading and writing. Tina is a fiery, independent woman whose strong opinions tend to influence their decisions. Bobby is an adventure lover who has rock-climbed since high school. He spent much of his single life on a motorcycle. Before they were married, they had heated discussions about

riding motorcycles – Tina saw it as too risky for a married man, Bobby saw it as invigorating, and he went to great lengths to be as safe as possible. Bobby heard and felt Tina’s fear and sold his motorcycle to a friend. Three years later, Bobby’s friend put the motorcycle up for sale, and Tina bought it back for her husband.

This is mutual humility.

Pam and Greg met in college. He wanted to be a pastor, she wanted to be a therapist. Both careers would take significant investment of time and money. They ended up going to graduate school simultaneously, both working on the side. After both of them graduated, they began their careers and were excellent at what they did. Children came, and Pam left her practice and became a stay-at-home mom – not because Greg pressured her to do so; in fact, he was willing to be the one to stay home. No, Pam had wanted the experience of being with her young children and was thankful to have the opportunity. When Pam and Greg moved into a new neighborhood, no one knew Pam was a licensed therapist who had logged hundreds of counseling hours to get where she had been, but that did not bother her at all. She and Greg are allowing each other to do things they love to do, and they both feel *free*. Pam plans to return to a counseling practice, and I am confident that she will. Right now, she and Greg are just taking one day at a time.

This is mutual humility.

Pete and Marilyn were high school sweethearts in the fifties and were married while Pete was in the service. They took on fairly traditional roles in their marriage, as most people did then. Marilyn did all the cooking and cleaning and most of the child-rearing. One thing that was especially endearing about this couple was that they shared a dramatic flair and had performed together in variety shows at their church. As they both turned 70, they were just getting settled into an active retirement when Marilyn began forgetting things, and her mood would change for no reason. She was soon diagnosed with Alzheimers, and their retirement began to take a different shape than they had expected. But Pete knew that now, more than ever before, he was called to love his wife. Pete’s patience and gentleness were kicked into high gear. He cooked and cleaned for her, bathed her, sang to her, led her everywhere by the hand, until it got to be too much for him to handle alone. Marilyn died in an Alzheimer’s unit, with Pete still by her side.

This is mutual humility – over a lifetime.

These relationships and the humble give-and-take that characterizes them are signs to the world of God’s love. May God give you the grace in your relationships to show forth God’s love in humility.