

"Restored Relationships"

Ephesians 5:22-33

August 26, 2012

13th Sunday After Pentecost

When I was in college, I served as an RA (resident assistant) of a dormitory. Among my duties was the enforcement of rules. I remember one day going into a student's room and seeing a case of beer on the floor under his desk – a clear violation of campus policy which said that no alcohol was allowed in the rooms. The student didn't try to hide it and didn't appear concerned that I saw it. I said, "Mike, you know you can't have beer in your room. That's a violation of the rules." I'll never forget his response. He looked me straight in the eye, without guilt and without anger, and said, "Oh, yes, I know that. I just disagree with the rules." I was dumbfounded. He knew the rule and admitted that his actions were not in conformity with the rule. But he seemed to justify his actions simply because he disagreed with them.

Sometimes pastors have the same experience when expounding on the Law of God. We can quote chapter and verse of the Bible. Christians will see it and admit what the Bible says. Yet they will feel free to disobey or ignore it because they disagree with what it says (usually when it hits too close to home).

I might get that same kind of reaction today. Our text before us today speaks of God's design for the relationship between wives and husbands in marriage. This can be a very sensitive topic. We are torn between the world's design for marriage and God's design for marriage. We may agree in theory about God's plan for husbands and wives, but disagree when it's applied to us individually, usually because we feel there is something in our particular situation which exempts us from having to follow it

Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says, "Wives should submit in everything to their husbands." "Submit" is considered to be a dirty word in our age which emphasizes total equality and total individuality. It means to subordinate one's self to another. "Used in a military

sense of soldiers submitting to their superior or slaves submitting to their masters. The word has primarily the idea of giving up one's own right or will." (Rienecer/Rogers, p.538)

Lest we think Paul lets men off the hook, he writes, "Husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." "Love" here is more than an emotion or a feeling. It is complete and utter dedication to another to the point of sacrificing one's life on behalf of the other.

These are hard words to hear. People have difficulties with them and don't want to follow them for several reasons. First, they don't fit in well with our natural inclinations or with what our culture tells us. Christians will admit that these words are from the Bible. Many will agree that they are the Word of God. But they will disagree that these words apply to them because of extenuating circumstances in their marriage.

But the Law of God found in the Word of God judges us and condemns us, whether we like it or not. It doesn't matter whether we or our culture agrees with God's standards. It is God, not culture, who sets the standards. Failing to heed these words or outright refusal to follow them condemns us.

Secondly, some might have trouble with the applicability of these words in our setting today. This text is usually read at weddings. In thirty years, I don't know that I've preached on this text, apart from at a wedding. And even when this text is preached on at that time, the sentimentality of the setting and the emotion of the day may keep us from really hearing them. What application can there be when many here are not married?

To answer that, we need to go back to verse 21 immediately before our text where Paul writes, "Submit *to one another* out of reverence for Christ." "Submission" is not just something wives are to do. Our text is but an application of something all Christians are to do: submit to one another. Paul expands on that in Philippians where he writes, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." (Phil 2:3-4)

The self-sacrificing love which husbands are to do is something that God requires of all Christians, as well. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This is found in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

So if these commands regarding relationship are still the inspired will and Word of God and they apply to all Christians and not just husbands and wives, what is our real problem with them? We conclude that they are just too impossible to do. Wives see faults in husbands which make them unwilling to submit. Husbands see flaws in wives which make them not want to love. We all look around at each other today and see all sorts of faults and flaws.

Sin has broken our relationships on all levels, beginning with our relationship with God and filtering down to our relationships with each other. Sin has corrupted our nature. We don't want to submit to one another. We think the way to have a successful relationship is to have our needs met. So we fight to get satisfaction for ourselves.

Our love is not self-sacrificing. It is often contingent upon getting something in return. We love someone because they make us happy, because they are beautiful/handsome, because they have the means to buy us what we want, and so on. At best, we say that marriage (and any other relationship) is a 50/50 proposition. I'll do my part to love if you do your part.

But this idea of giving up our rights and our will for the sake of another and submitting to them is something we just can't do. The idea of loving someone regardless of how they respond to the point of sacrificing our lives – well, that's just impossible.

We would be right. It IS impossible – for us. But, as much as we think this text is about marriage or our relationships in general, it's not. It's about Christ. He is the One who completely gave up His rights and His will and submitted Himself to His Heavenly Father. This was not easy for Him to do just because He was God. As the God-Man, He struggled with it. Remember how He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” (Luke 22:42)

We all know where this submission to the Father led. In Philippians, we read, “[Jesus] made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil. 2:7-8)

Jesus fully submitted to the Father’s will and it cost Him His life. But He didn’t do this because He had to. Jesus didn’t submit to the Father because He was obligated to. In addition to complete submission to the Father, Jesus had totally self-sacrificing love for us. He didn’t love like we do – to get something back. There was nothing we could give back to Him. He didn’t love us because we were so lovable. He saw our flaws. He saw our imperfections. He saw our sin which caused us to turn our backs on Him, reject Him, and live in opposition to Him. Yet He loved us anyway. Paul writes to the Romans, “Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:7-8)

The will of God to which Jesus completely submitted Himself out of selfless love for each of us gained what God desired: the forgiveness of our sins and the cleansing of our souls. As our text says, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” The judgment of guilt against us has been removed through the forgiveness of sin. In Holy Baptism, we have been completely cleansed through the washing of water with the word. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead not only guarantees this fact, but also is the power to resurrect us to new life.

In that new life, all our relationships, broken by sin, have been restored. We are in relationship with God. And that’s where some people stop. But there’s more. In Christ, we are not only in relationship with God, but we are also in relationship with everyone else who is in Christ. As a result,

we are called by God to live differently: submitting to one another in all humility and loving one another lacking all selfishness

The One who allows us to do this is Christ. Some would think, “Yes, Christ is a good example for us in this way.” But Christ as the example for how to submit to others and love selflessly doesn’t help us much. A perfect example only reminds us how imperfect we are and fills us with guilt and shame.

It is Christ the Savior who helps us to live this life. We are no longer constrained by the threats of the Law to submit to one another. We are no longer “guilted” into loving someone because we should. Christ has rescued us from the threats and punishments of the Law. Christ has freed us from the requirements of the Law so that we might follow the tenets of the Law out of love for Him and for our neighbor.

One preacher said it’s like going to a college class and being worried about getting a good grade. You might try so hard to get the grade that you don’t really learn anything. If the professor started the first day of class by saying, “You all have an “A”. Now go out and learn.” The relief of having the weight of class requirements lifted off your shoulders would free you to simply learn.

In the same way, instead of fretting over the difficulty of our text or counting up the number of times we have submitted ourselves to another or loved selflessly (and compared it with how others have done), realize that the weight of the Law’s requirements has been lifted off your shoulders because Jesus submitted to His Father’s will and loved us selflessly enough to sacrifice Himself on the cross. Now go out and live.

Imagine how life would be if we were submitting ourselves to one another instead of demanding others to serve us; or if we were selflessly loving others rather than waiting for others to love us. But, as we live in Christ in this community, hearing His Word and feeding on His body and blood, His life of submission and love will be lived out through us. And when we fail (as we will do)

and seek only to serve ourselves and love ourselves, Christ's love and forgiveness are always there to bring us back.

As we struggle to follow our Lord's call to submit to each other, wondering if it's worth it or whether we might not get taken advantage of when we love selflessly, a poem attributed to Mother Teresa which hung on her orphanage in Calcutta might give us something to consider:.

*People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered.
Love them anyway.*

*If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.
Be kind anyway.*

*If you are successful, you will win some false friends and true enemies.
Succeed anyway.*

*The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.
Be good anyway.*

*Honesty and frankness will make you vulnerable.
Be honest and frank anyway.*

*What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.
Build anyway.*

*People need help but will attack you if you help them.
Help them anyway.*

*In the final analysis, it is between you and God.
It was never between you and them anyway.*

Amen.