

This is a hard saying

Homily on Ephesians 5:21-32 – Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

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On the television drama, *The West Wing*, there was an episode which opened with the President and First Lady having an argument as they returned from Sunday Mass. They were arguing over the homily on Ephesians 5. As with many arguments between humans, and husbands and wives are no exception to this pattern, the dispute was really two parallel monologues. President Bartlett was criticizing the rhetoric of the preacher. Dr. Bartlett was praising the interpretation the priest offered, because he stressed “husbands love your wives” as the key to the passage, rather than “wives be submissive to your husbands.” At the end of the argument, President Bartlett actually engages his wife’s statements by saying “You know the passage isn’t about marriage at all. It’s about Christ and his relationship to the Church.” It was a great scene, if for no other reason than that you rarely get sound biblical exegesis on prime time television.

In spite of the fact that every Christian church in history has appointed this text to be read at the marriage service, President Bartlett is right, this text is not about marriage. Marriage is one of the analogies being used by the sacred author to express a truth about Christ. The text does have some profound things to say about marriage, but this is secondary. It is important to say this because the analogies are flawed – they

assume the cultural status quo uncritically. This is what most people notice when they hear this text. This is why, like Abby Bartlett, they miss the meaning.

What they miss is the doctrine of grace. There are two ways to read the Bible. The first way is to see the Bible as a description of human transactions with God. The second is to read it as the record of God's intentions for humankind. Let me say at the outset that the second way is the correct way. The first way is at the root of all inaccurate interpretations. This difference is important, because it allows us to better understand what, perhaps, is the hardest saying in the Bible. The sacred author writes:

Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:25-27)

The hard saying is that Christ sacrificed himself for humankind *prior* to humankind's submission. The world would sooner believe Jesus is God than to believe he is this kind of God. One of the hallmarks of contemporary thought, expressed by feminism, is that submission should not be part of any relationship, because of the danger that it will lead to manipulation or mistreatment.¹ The secular scholar will point to Ephesians as the worst example of biblical religion, because it talks about submission: of wives to husbands, children to parents, and even submission in labor relations (which in those days was called slavery). Feminism is correct in its criticism of all forms of

¹ Richard J. Erickson, "Ephesians" in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1989), 1031.

manipulation or mistreatment, and of the conditions which foster them. But while the sacred author is using the three flawed relationships of his day (husband-wife, parent-child, and master-slave) as metaphors, his main subject is the relationship of Christ to the Church.

The paradigm is this: that husbands “must love their wives regardless of any non-submission,” that parents should love their children, regardless of any non-submission, and, this is the hardest one, that masters should love their slaves, regardless of any non-submission.²

This whole business hinges on the deep biblical insight noted by Richard Erickson, “that our work never places God in our debt; his rewards are freely given out of the joy it bring him to give them.”³ The Bible is clear, “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom. 5:8) And this is the master metaphor which allows the sacred author to apply his insight about Christ and the Church back to the three relationships.

As James C. Gavin has noted in his outline of Ephesians, this letter describes what we receive through Christ as members of his body. “These all illustrate unity of purpose and show how each individual member is a part which must work together with all the other parts. In our own lives, we should work to eradicate all backbiting,

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 1032.

gossip, criticism, jealousy, anger and bitterness, because these are barriers to unity in the church.”⁴

This work, however, does not create the relationship, rather, it perfects it. This work is an expression of gratitude for something freely given, which we can only receive. Before we submitted to Christ, he gave himself for us. Our submission is gratitude for something we could never earn. Our submission becomes a gift through the gratitude with which we offer it. Erikson puts it this way:

Thus Paul has outlined the calling which God has given to this new family in Christ as they live their new life in the midst of a sin-bound age. They find themselves in two ages at once, already members of the new age to come and still members of the old age of darkness.”⁵

This new life is like something encountered in marriage. Couples sometimes have the experience of the love of the other person surpassing their imagination. They will say to themselves, “Why does he love me so much?” And they will try to find out what it is about themselves which is lovable. But that is not how love works. Love emerges from the lover alone, not from a transaction between them.

This is likely why the sacred author chose marriage as his master metaphor. The metaphor lets him teach the fundamental truth that love does not depend on our submission. It depends on the character of the one who gives it. Love is not a transaction. Love is a grace.

⁴ James C. Gavin, “Blueprint of Ephesians” in *Life Application Bible*, ed. Ronald A. Beers (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1990), 2064.

⁵ Erickson, *op. cit.*, 1033.