

21st SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME (Cycle B)

August 27, 2006 – Holy Family Sunday – Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

INTRODUCTION

Today is what some people call “Elbow Sunday.” During the second reading from the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians, it seems like there are quite a few elbows poking into ribs back and forth between husbands and wives when they hear a verse they particularly think their spouse ought to hear. Yeah, I saw you.

St. Paul says,

Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord.
For the husband is head of his wife
just as Christ is head of the church,
As the church is subordinate to Christ,
so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything.

And the husbands’ elbows start poking . . .

But then Paul says,

Husbands, love your wives,
even as Christ loved the church
and handed himself over for her to sanctify her,
. . .
So also husbands should love their wives as their own bodies.

Then the wives’ elbows start poking . . .

But between pokes, we can miss the crux of Paul’s teaching here. It’s not just for wives, and not just for husbands.

Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ.
. . .
For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother
and be joined to his wife,
and the two shall become one flesh.
This is a great mystery,

but I speak in reference to Christ and the church.

Both spouses are called to subordinate their lives and wills to the other.

We all know that in Paul's day, women just didn't have the same status as men in society. They were subordinate to men in pretty much every way. The way Paul expresses this subordination seems offensive to us today. At least I hope it does. Sadly, there are still some cultures on earth that still operate this way, and even a few in our own culture who wish we still did business this way.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says:

“Marriage is partnership. Two uniquely gifted, caring people working together toward goals which they both declare to be important. Marriage is a safe and encouraging environment where partners share blessings, as well as trials and burdens. Partners do not work separately, nor do they pull in different directions. They combine their strength to pull the load together.”

So it's not about “who's the boss?” or “Who's in charge?” It's not about one party riding in the wagon while the other party pulls the load.

We who are married would do well to think often about what it was like when we “fell in love” with our spouses. When we fall in love, our relationship becomes the center point of our life. Everything else becomes secondary.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) wrote,

“Love alone is capable of uniting living beings in such a way as to complete and fulfill them, for it alone takes them and joins them by what is deepest in themselves.

That's heady stuff. I think Teilhard was on to something there, but sometimes I think he was not really of our world. Maybe we have to temper that with a dose of reality.

I've heard it said that the truth cannot be spoken at commencement ceremonies, and at weddings.

At weddings, people may be so blinded by the light of love that they forget that marriage is less about love than consent. I remember one person who described the feeling as “*a glow, . . . the euphoria of shared love.*” I remember thinking that Jack Daniel’s has been known to produce similar effects, but is not the basis for marriage.

Surely, love is important. But it can lead us to take a lot of unconscious baggage to the altar with us. Sometimes, as people repeat the marriage vows, they are really thinking . . .

“I am counting on you to make my life meaningful. I am counting on you to always be there for me. I am counting on you to read my mind and anticipate all my needs. I am counting on you to bind up my wounds and fulfill the deficits of my life. I am counting on you to complete me, to make me a whole person, to heal my stricken soul.”

And of course . . . though they might not realize it . . . their partner is expressing exactly the same subconscious agenda.

Who would give consent to such an impossible relationship? If that’s what you are expecting, it makes marriage a lot harder.

In the beginning, love is at the center. Over time, when the relationship becomes more settled (particularly after we have children), things can change. Our children, our work, our hobbies, our friends can take center stage, leaving the interpersonal relationship between husband and wife to be relegated to the background, only getting our attention when problems arise.

That’s when consent kicks in. Or to put it more clearly, that’s why consent is in many ways more important than love. In marriage, a man and a woman exchange absolute, irrevocable, unconditional consent to all the rights and responsibilities that make up marriage. It’s not conditioned on whether or not they feel “affection” for each other at any particular moment. If Teilhard was right, that husbands and wives do indeed join themselves by what is deepest in themselves, then that’s the essence of consent.

We can enrich our relationships with our spouses by sharing what is most meaningful to us. The ultimate in meaning is to share a common philosophy

of life, a “life purpose.” Couples who choose a path of spirituality together have great source of meaning in their lives.

Envision yourselves at the end of life. It's your sixtieth or sixty-fifth wedding anniversary. You're gathered with your children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They're reflecting on your life together, telling stories and expressing their love.

What would you want them to say? What memories would you want them to have? What accomplishments would you want them to remember? What values do you want to pass on to your children and their descendants?

Just something to think about.

In Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, we see a couple tracing the sign of the cross on each other's foreheads just before going to sleep. That can be a powerful sign of a relationship of mutual consent and sharing. Even if there has been friction between you and your spouse during the day, it can be a sign that, no matter what, we're in this together with God.

So what?

So, the idea of Christian marriage looks very different from what we often encounter in our society these days. We see relationships based on mere affection, relationships that come and go as the wind changes. But Christian marriage is a covenant in which both parties subordinate their own personal needs and desires for the good of the marital relationship.

How we live out our mutual “subordination” today looks very different from how it might have looked in first-century Palestine. Yet there is a common thread. Christian marriage is a metaphor for the spousal relationship between Christ and His Church. We subordinate our individual needs and desires for what is right and good for us all. Or, as it says in our first reading from the book of Joshua . . .

“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord!”

READINGS

Reading 1

Jos 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b

Joshua gathered together all the tribes of Israel at Shechem,
summoning their elders, their leaders,
their judges, and their officers.
When they stood in ranks before God,
Joshua addressed all the people:
“If it does not please you to serve the LORD,
decide today whom you will serve,
the gods your fathers served beyond the River
or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are now dwelling.
As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

But the people answered,
“Far be it from us to forsake the LORD
for the service of other gods.
For it was the LORD, our God,
who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt,
out of a state of slavery.
He performed those great miracles before our very eyes
and protected us along our entire journey
and among the peoples through whom we passed.
Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 34:2-3, 16-17, 18-19, 20-21

R. (9a) Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.
I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall be ever in my mouth.
Let my soul glory in the LORD;
the lowly will hear me and be glad.
R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.
The LORD has eyes for the just,
and ears for their cry.
The LORD confronts the evildoers,
to destroy remembrance of them from the earth.
R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.
When the just cry out, the LORD hears them,
and from all their distress he rescues them.
The LORD is close to the brokenhearted;
and those who are crushed in spirit he saves.
R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Many are the troubles of the just one,
but out of them all the LORD delivers him;
he watches over all his bones;
not one of them shall be broken.
R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Reading II
Eph 5:21-32 or 5:2a, 25-32

Brothers and sisters:
Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ.
Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord.
For the husband is head of his wife
just as Christ is head of the church,
he himself the savior of the body.
As the church is subordinate to Christ,
so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything.
Husbands, love your wives,
even as 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.
So also husbands should love their wives as their own bodies.
He who loves his wife loves himself.
For no one hates his own flesh
but rather nourishes and cherishes it,
even as Christ does the church,
because we are members of his body.
For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother
and be joined to his wife,
and the two shall become one flesh.
This is a great mystery,
but I speak in reference to Christ and the church.

or

Brothers and sisters:
Live in love, as Christ loved us.
Husbands, love your wives,
even as 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.
So also husbands should love their wives as their own bodies.
He who loves his wife loves himself.
For no one hates his own flesh
but rather nourishes and cherishes it,
even as Christ does the church,
because we are members of his body.
For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother
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Gospel

Jn 6:60-69

Many of Jesus' disciples who were listening said,
"This saying is hard; who can accept it?"
Since Jesus knew that his disciples were murmuring about this,
he said to them, "Does this shock you?
What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending
to where he was before?
It is the spirit that gives life,
while the flesh is of no avail.
The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life.
But there are some of you who do not believe."
Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe
and the one who would betray him.
And he said,
"For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me
unless it is granted him by my Father."

As a result of this,
many of his disciples returned to their former way of life
and no longer accompanied him.
Jesus then said to the Twelve, "Do you also want to leave?"
Simon Peter answered him, "Master, to whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life.
We have come to believe
and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God."