

VI. "Who Is Head of the Household?"
Six-Sermon Series: **The Family of God**
I Corinthians 13; Ephesians 5:21-33
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Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Ephesians 5:21

It was the great theologian Karl Barth who said that we should hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other when we preach, and I have today, the Holy Bible and today's *New York Times*. The headline says, "It's Official: To Be Married Means To Be Outnumbered." For the first time in American society, fewer than 50% of American households contain couples who are married, with or without children. The percentage now is 49.7%. A growing number of adults are spending more of their lives single or living unmarried with partners. "The social and political and economical implications are profound," the *Times* says. "This would seem to close the book on the Ozzie and Harriett era that has characterized the last century of American life."

The headlines notwithstanding, I want to preach about marriage today. I have been grateful for your thoughtful attention for the past six weeks as we have focused on the theme "The Family of God" during morning worship. We have looked at the family from various perspectives and in various configurations. We have thought interesting thoughts, trying to use the Scriptures of the Judeo-Christian tradition as our guide for life and practice, trying to figure out how to receive a living word from God for us today in the families and relationships in which we actually live.

It is not easy to be a part of a family in the year 2006. In writing of family life, essayist and poet May Sarton said, "The United Nations is child's play compared to the tugs and splits and need to understand and forgive that exists in any family."

I especially like what author Mary Karr has written, "A dysfunctional family is any family with more than one person in it." The family is under great pressure from within. The outside pressures are equally enormous. And yet all of us and all of human society have a huge stake in the well-

being of the family, whatever its shape or form. Home is the place where the moral worth of a person is nurtured and celebrated; home is the place where, for good or ill, we are first exposed to how human beings treat one another. No society in history has survived without the family in one form or another as its base.

And so in this final sermon in the fall sermon series, I want to explore with you whether or not there is a specific family plan revealed in Scripture. Many fundamentalists and conservative religious groups believe that there is and that what is wrong with the institution today is the direct result of the neglect of the Biblical model for marriage and family. In his bestselling book *Listen America*, Jerry Falwell writes, “We would not be having the present moral crisis if women accepted their proper roles as designated by God. . . In the Christian home, the father is to be the responsible one for exercising spiritual control. He is to be the head over his wife and his children. . . In the Christian home, the woman is to be submissive . . .” This is what Jerry Falwell says the Bible says. Is it the case?

I am convinced that our tradition offers resources that can help and edify family life and specifically the relationship between husbands and wives, but I am also convinced that Scripture is used to reinforce patterns of power and submission that reflect neither the nature of God nor the respectful reciprocity God intends for human relationships as their operative principle.

Let me speak a moment about the misuse of the Bible. It is nothing new. Scripture has often been co-opted to reinforce the world view and predilections of particular groups and individuals. History is replete with examples of the selective isolation of passages of Scripture to justify just about everything you can imagine, from anti-Semitism to slavery. In fact this reading from Ephesians continues with the admonition that slaves should be subject to their masters. In our day, one does not often hear advocates of a literal interpretation of Scripture insisting that adulterers should be stoned, or that women should be forbidden from wearing jewelry to church.

Another crucial aspect to be considered in the relationship between the Bible and family life today is the vastness of distance between the social world and the familial worlds in which the Old Testament and the New Testament were written, and the modern world in which we live. Ours is a western, technological, modern society. Ours is a society in which many families

rely on two incomes to survive, a society in which single women quite often serve as heads of their own households. Ours is a society marked by a growing acknowledgement of gender equality. We understand now, as previous generations did not, that both women and men can be pretty good at raising children and at caring for children. Ours is a society in which our mates for life are chosen on the basis of love and compatibility rather than assigned to us by the family patriarch. All of these differences are real; they are what I consider to be signs of progress, and, in any case, not a single one of these genies that I have mentioned will ever go back in the bottle.

I think of a family story from the book of Genesis. It consumes the entire 24th chapter of the Book of Genesis, so I deliberately did not have it read as our Old Testament lesson today, but it is a story that some of you might be familiar with and which reflects a near Eastern, nomadic, patriarchal, pre-industrial society. It is the story of Rebekah and Isaac. Their marriage took place because Abraham, Isaac's father, wanted his son's bride not to come from Canaan, but from the family clan that he had come from. And so he sent his servant back to Hebron, the home place of Abraham and Sarah, where he discovers the beautiful Rebekah drawing water from the spring. The servant and Rebekah's brother make a deal about Rebekah without any consultation with Rebekah at all. They seal it with the exchange of gold and silver. Rebekah and her maids ride across the desert on camels to Canaan, and there she meets her husband-to-be, Isaac, for the first time. The great thing about this story is that, for the first time, the Bible tells us that two people loved one another. Isaac loved Rebekah. That's sweet, but it's irrelevant to the story. The point was that the blessing that God had bestowed upon Abraham, the patriarch, needed to be continued for another generation, and so the marriage came to be.

There is no Hebrew equivalent for our modern English word for family. The closest is the word "Bet ab" which means literally "father's house." It reflects a male-headed, multi-generational household as the basic unit of ancient Israel. Accepted customs in that household, beginning with Abraham's family included polygamy and the requirement that a male relative marry a childless widow in the family. The 25th chapter of Genesis talks a lot about the sons of Abraham's concubines and what is the just and fair way for them to be treated.

In short, it is unproductive to look in the Old Testament for actual models for modern marriage. What we do find in the Hebrew Scriptures are these

three things: One - the inscrutable, providential hand of God at work in human relationships, working for good and for grace. Secondly, we discover that the covenantal promises that are made in the name of God are made to be kept and when they are broken, - this is the third point – suffering and strife occur as a consequence.

The Old Testament can serve as a good corrective to our modern consumerist understanding of marriage, that its only purpose is to make the individuals involved happy. Listen. If I'm not happy, six months into this thing, – when there's a bill to pay, or a toothbrush left out on the bathroom counter, and I'm not getting my needs met, then I'll see you around, because the whole point of my human life is for me to be happy. That is not the only point of human existence. Surely, modern society has something to learn from our Scriptural forebears about the fact that there is more involved than just us and our feelings on any given day.

We have a lot to learn about the value of the extended family as well and the deep meaning that comes from realizing that every human being is born into a community of people who have an ongoing story with God. Generation to generation.

In looking at the Hebrew Scriptures, we see that families in the Bible are made up of sinful human beings, just as your family and mine are made up of sinful human beings. In fact, Isaac and Rebekah's marriage didn't go so well. Betrayal and trickery were to come. The couple had two boys, Jacob and Esau, who wrote the book on sibling rivalry. To go back to Mary Karr's point, a dysfunctional family is any family with more than one person in it.

One last thing about the Hebrew Scriptures – I believe that one of our most serious problems today is the extraordinary pressure we place on the nuclear family and the marriage that holds it together. I think we tend to make an idol out of marriage. The institutions of marriage and of family are very important, but they have never been intended to be ends in themselves. Even our marriages and our families exist to glorify God and to serve God's purposes of grace and redemption.

I have put off as long as I can going to the letter to the Ephesians, and now it's time for me to be brave and dive right into “wives should submit to their husbands.” (Those who take this passage literally ought also to read a study done by a professor at Washington State University several years ago. The professor had researched a number of what he considered to be good

marriages, trying to determine the common traits they all shared. He discovered what all those marriages had in common was that the husband did just what the wife said!)

What Falwell and company forget is that the Ephesians passage begins with the call to mutual subjection: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” The writer, who likely was not the Apostle Paul, but someone who wrote in his name, lays out the point of mutual accountability and subjection one to the other. His intention was not the oppression or subjugation of women, but the creation of a relationship similar to the relationship between Christ and his church. Scholars categorize these verses in Ephesians as being a part of what is called “the household code literature” in the New Testament. The Ephesians version of the household code contains rules for husbands and wives, parents and children, and then as I indicated, slaves and masters.

The writer clearly does not question the social and economic organization of the Greco-Roman world; nor did he question the hierarchical world view to which he was heir and which he doubtless believed to be divinely ordained. You will see that same understanding of the universe reflected in Genesis. There is God, and then there’s man, and then there’s woman, and then there is snake. We are more enlightened than our forebears in understanding how the universe is organized.

There are many things that I could say about Ephesians, but I will say just these two. First, the passage cannot be understood unless it is read within the larger context of the witness of the New Testament, which bears witness to the life-giving liberating love of God revealed in Christ. Jesus challenged again and again the oppressive structures and the outdated social assumptions of his day. In contrast to the religion in which he was formed, in which women were not even allowed to enter the sanctuary for prayer, Jesus called women to be among his earliest followers and they, women were the first witnesses to the resurrection. The whole thrust of the New Testament is the transformation of every aspect of human life in light of the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul captures this revolutionary concept when he writes, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, (that was happening in Paul’s lifetime), there was neither slave nor free (it hadn’t happened yet), there was neither male nor female (that category of hierarchy is ending), “for all are one in Christ.”

The second thing I would say is that the purpose of the letter to the Ephesians was surely not to prescribe a model for all times for a marriage relationship. For one thing, the writer did not believe there was going to be any such thing as 'all time'. He believed that Jesus would come again in his lifetime. Because history was about to come to an end, believers were to live in an interim way, because the new creation was about to be born. What the writer wanted to do was to help believers in that particular time and place realize that as long as they were on this earth, they were to do things differently from other people because of Christ. Other husbands might be cruel or indifferent; that was the usual pattern in Greco-Roman society; women were treated horribly by their husbands. But Christian husbands were to behave differently. Christian wives who might themselves be married to pagan husbands: if they respected those pagan husbands, their respect would win their husband's heart to the good news and the new way of being in the world that Christ had embodied.

Who can actually believe that the answer to the challenges of the modern marriage is to adopt assigned sex roles from an ancient time and ancient cultures? Surely modern marriage would be better served if we could discern how in our day and in our context we could treat our life partners with tenderness and respect and learn to live together in sacrificial love. How might we embody the eternal Christian values? By following Paul's admonition to love in I Corinthians, by remembering that domination of one human being by another has never been a sign of God's presence in any age.

Who is to lead in a household in a partnership? Sometimes the husband should be the leader, and sometimes the wife should be the leader. Both partners can exercise leadership depending on skill sets, if you will. There is absolutely nothing wrong with the traditional division of labor and leadership in a marriage; neither is there anything wrong with a non-traditional division of leadership and roles in a marriage, as long as the agreement to follow that way has been reached fairly and in the context of respect and love – not a self-centered life but a life that understands the need to serve the good of all and of everyone. This is the basic character of the universe, and this is the way, I believe, God would have us live. In one situation, one brings particular gifts, and in another, the other has a special gift. What matters is not the form. What matters is how to get to where you are and live together in peace and reciprocity.

There is not a divinely inspired pattern for how a marriage ought to be organized, but I believe that God grants partners the capacity to grow together and to enjoy one another over a long period of time. I believe that, even in the day in which there are all kinds of pressures on marriage and family life, good, lasting marriages and happy families are still possible. I am optimistic because I know where families came from. God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, and behold God looked at the two God had made to live together in love, and God said, “This is very good.”

A final word about parents and children. It is necessary for parents to respect their children. Respect, at its most basic, means accepting your children for who they actually are and not being disappointed in them because they are not who you think they ought to be. But respect also means loving them enough to set limits and to expect things from them. Children do not know as much as parents do. Children need to be nurtured toward who they will become, who they are capable of becoming. Do not let your children be in charge of your household. Raise them in such a way that they can become adults who know how to be in charge, because you treated them with respect when they were young. Everyone can learn self-governance, but no one can learn it unless the adults responsible for the children help the children learn self-control.

I close this sermon and this series of sermons with a reminder that we all need love from one another. Love is less perfect understanding than it is surprised respect. We need sanctuary from one another. Every single one of us needs other people to care about us and to create a space where we can be together with them. “Sanctuary”, John Cheever wrote, “is the essence of love. Someone has to promise to keep our secrets” and to welcome us exactly as we are.

Let us, members of the family of God, be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. In love, let us bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things, until the time comes when we shall know fully even as we have been fully known. With thanks be to God, who created us, and to Christ, our brother, who gives us grace to be human with one another. Amen.