



**RESURRECTION REMIX:
STRENGTHENING THE FAMILY
LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

Sunday, April 6, 2008

Rodney Sadler Jr., Lectionary Team Commentator

Lection - Ephesians 5:21-33 and 6:1-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

Ephesians 5:21-33

(v. 21) Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. (v. 22) Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. (v. 23) For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. (v. 24) As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. (v. 25) Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, (v. 26) that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, (v. 27) 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. (v. 28) Even so husbands should

love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. (v. 29) For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, (v. 30) because we are members of his body. (v. 31) "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." (v. 32) This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church; (v. 33) however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Ephesians 6:1-9

(v. 1) Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. (v. 2) "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), (v. 3) "that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth." (v. 4) Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (v. 5) Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ; (v. 6) not in the way of eye-service, as men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, (v. 7) rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to men, (v. 8) knowing that whatever good any one does, he will receive the same again from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. (v. 9) Masters, do the same to them, and forbear threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

I. Description of Liturgical Moment

The twenty-first century is a high-speed, gadget-driven, technological era. Although the Word of God remains timeless, our methods of application are not and must change so that they are always relevant and useful. Past cultural wisdom built bridges that brought us over troubled waters, and present cultural wisdom is remodeling or "remixing" those bridges. In the Hip Hop family, coupling some of the old with the new is called "remixing" as was noted in last week's lection commentary. Just two weeks removed from Easter, it is important to reflect on the impact of the resurrection on our lives today, that is, how does the resurrection remix our lives?

The resurrection remixes us on an individual level so we talk about a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ." We often forget however, that the resurrection also remixes and transforms larger social systems such as the family. Giving attention to the individual and the social impact of the resurrection, particularly on the family, is a remix of the typical approach taken when preaching during the Sundays that shortly follow Easter.

The African American family is often forgotten during the preaching moment, but a remixing of the implications of the resurrection will not only help us remember to give it much needed attention, but can also strengthen it. Resurrection power remixes the lives of our families so that they may truly live. This liturgical moment may focus on the church as the family of God but it primarily addresses the breakdown in black families (absent fathers, single mothers, imprisoned children, domestic violence, et al.) with the aim of building them up. New initiatives or social programs can be introduced on this

day, providing sound solutions to some of the problems. Families that are “whole” may even “adopt” those that are deemed broken; revealing that humanity itself is a family. This day will tell the hurting family that their help does not just come from the Lord but also from us! “You are not alone” should be the message to our families, all because of the resurrection.

The resurrection remixes or redefines what it means to be family. In the Hellenistic world, being in Christ radically altered the nature of what it meant to be a family. Traditional assumptions about the roles of husbands and wives were transformed. Resurrection power challenges long held beliefs about power and privilege. Pursuing power and privilege have hindered healthy relationships in African American communities between men and women, husbands and wives. This reading reassesses what it means to be a wife or a husband in terms of God’s resurrection remix work through Christ Jesus our Lord. No matter where or how we worship, none of us have been untouched by the skyrocketing divorce rates that cry out for solutions, not just from society but from sacred halls. We need to become wiser to know how to make our families stronger. This text helps us do that.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Ephesians 5:21-33 and 6:1-9

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I come to this text as a recovering sexist (as my wife will attest). I entered seminary as a young Baptist minister from an evangelical background and held fast to the traditional interpretation of this passage as a text legitimizing the role of the male as the “head of the household” over the female. I continued to gravitate toward this text because I felt, in some way, that it was a biblical justification for a superior role to that of my wife. I heard it saying that I should win the argument. I should determine the rules. I should get to decide because I am the man and she was the woman, my wife. She should be submissive to me and support my decisions. This is how I read it, and heard it taught and preached.

But the more time I spent with this passage during my seminary and graduate studies, the more this interpretative tradition was eroded. I began to note problems with my interpretive stance as I encountered African American womanist and feminist readings of Ephesians 5:21ff. I began to note problems with my way of reading this passage as I gained greater facility with the underlying Greek New Testament. At first, I thought that the text was simply problematic from a power standpoint, seeking to protect a privilege with which I was increasingly familiar as an educated middle class black man. Yet, through much prayer and study, I learned that far from a text that should be ignored, this passage should be embraced. It is liberating and provides insight into the transformative power of being “in Christ,” the power of being remixed by the resurrection.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Perhaps no bible passage has been more misunderstood than this brief portion of Ephesians 5. Though part of a larger literary unit, this passage is frequently removed

from its overall context. By doing so, it is left to stand alone as the principally relevant portion of a set of rules known traditionally as the “Haustafeln,” or “household codes.” These “codes” stem from an earlier paradigm developed by the philosopher Aristotle and were generally thought to provide order in the home. Aristotle concluded that free male household leaders were the most important agents in a household and that other members such as the wife, children, or enslaved, were beholden to this man. That this way of being in relationships is found in Scripture demonstrates the tacit Christian agreement with the power arrangements popular in the larger Hellenistic world. By their actions, some African American males implicitly agree with this too. They act as if they can do whatever they want, whenever they want, regardless of what other family members say, just because they are the man of the house. Through this attitude, they show that they haven’t been remixed by the resurrection.

Many preach this text through the lens of Aristotle’s “codes” and preach it as the Christian way. Yet, the apostle’s point is different. He does not teach the “codes” but wants to revolutionize them. He offers an alternative arrangement for Christian families that is at odds with the ways of the Hellenistic world. The familiar notions of the “household codes” are remixed in order to show members of Christian families how to relate to each other.

The traditional way had the lower levels serving the top where the free male householder sat on his throne. Household members had to do whatever he commanded. They were not free, because everyone thought that the man was smarter. As first century Aristotelian philosopher Arius Didymus proclaimed:

The man has the rule of this household by nature. For the deliberative faculty of the woman is inferior, in children it does not yet exist, and in the case of slaves it is completely absent.¹

Though there must have been some obligation of the head of the house for proper governance of the house, this was generally implied, not explicitly stated as was everyone else’s obligation to him. He was the man and because rules for him were not explicit, many have used this to discern their own dictates concerning the obligations of husbands, usually to the detriment of wives. This is the type of reasoning that may account for a disproportionate number of black men who do not mind getting women pregnant but mind being a responsible parent. These men make up their own rules of what it means to be a father. Many times it means to be an absentee daddy because they think they can do whatever they want, whenever they want, just because they are male. This leaves the woman to struggle to survive with the children on her own. This notion of family needs to be remixed.

Remixing has to happen because too often preachers do not correctly divide this passage, and how we divide it shows what we expect it to mean. For example, some translations of the Bible (e.g. the New King James Version and the New International Version), begin the discussion about submission at Ephesians 5:22 and others at 5:21. Beginning at verse 22 suggests that the passage is primarily concerned with a wife’s submission to her husband, for it begins, “Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.” Those that begin this subsection at verse 22 may do so based on legitimate thematic and

grammatical considerations, but they miss the author's main point that actually spans at least from Ephesians 5:21 until 6:9. That is, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." This is the overall message of the passage—mutual submission to one another in Christ Jesus.

As a result of resurrection life and our new relationship in the resurrected Christ, what it means to be family changes. Family is remixed and becomes stronger. Women serve men but men also serve women. This becomes clear when the entire section is read to its conclusion in 6:9 "...with [God] there is no partiality." Hence, the entire passage should be read in its totality as "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ...with [God] there is no partiality." Or, as the King James Version puts it, "neither is there respect of persons with [God]." The woman, who has been the bedrock of black families, deserves just as much respect as the man. No less and no more.

Through this interpretation, the man-ruling-others-serving Aristotelian old-time way is remixed into "mutual submission" in Christ. The wife submits to her husband but her husband is charged to love his wife as Christ loved the Church (5:25) and we know that Christ died for us. In Christ's ultimate act of submission, husbands find their model for loving their wives. In the same way, an obligation of parents to children (6:4), and masters to slaves (6:9), is briefly stated. Love flows from heart to heart, breast to breast, bottom to top, top to bottom. One cannot miss this message of mutuality.

However, certain parts of the passage have been shunned. In her 1991 article in Stony the Road We Trod² Clarice Martin notes how African Americans have traditionally shunned the latter part of this literary unit that described the obligation of the enslaved to the master, yet African American male preachers have gravitated to the earlier part of the passage that lifts up the obligation of the wife to the husband! Logic would dictate that to challenge one portion of the passage, "slaves obey," would undermine the other, "wives submit." However, such "logic" does not seem to have overshadowed the self-serving desire to find a biblical justification for the subjugation of women to men.

This has been the source of no small amount of concern in our community for it has been used to justify everything from the universal authority of men over women, to the reason women should not preach, to the physical and psychological abuse of our mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and daughters. This is poor resurrection theology which means it is not good liberation theology. Rather, it is dead theology because it kills the lives of women who are crucial to the black family remix. Families will be strengthened when men and women, husbands and wives, mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, have mutual respect and love for each other.

"There is no favoritism with [God]."(NIV) We are all equally obligated to each other in Christ. A family is most viable when there is interdependence, because each member is responsible to and for the other. To lose sight of this or to preach a gospel of "favorites" from this passage is to abuse the Word of God, twisting it for our own selfish purpose. The revolutionary nature of being in a resurrected Christ transforms and remixes traditional power arrangements in the family. Rather than saying "I don't need you in my life" we would say "I need you to survive." We communicate better if we realize that we

are interdependent. We can face family challenges without packing our bags if we realize that we are interdependent. Everyone ends up with a safe place to fall if we live like transformed couples who are interdependent, firmly establishing this model for our children.

Celebration

What good news it is that we serve a God who does not play favorites. What a powerful resurrection message to daily keep in mind. No one can trick us or demean us into believing that any of us is worth less than someone else or worthy of less respect because of our gender or position in the family. God restores families to wholeness in Christ as we realize that we are all equally important to our Creator-Redeemer and all equally obligated to each other.

Descriptive Details

This text does not relate a story, but offers instruction. Many of the sensations present in a narrative are thus absent from this passage. That being said, possible images are:

Sights: 5:26 the image of the wife being cleansed by water; the image in 5:31 of the husband and wife merging into one flesh; see the image of the unwrinkled church that appears from 5:27; and

Sounds: hear the washing of the water in 5:26.

Notes

1. Boring, M. Eugene, Klaus Berger, and Carsten Colpe. Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995. p. 530.
2. Martin, Clarice J. “The Haustafeln (household codes) in African American biblical interpretation: ‘free slaves’ and ‘subordinate women’.” Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation. Ed. Cain Hope Felder. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991.