

Submitting to Love

Wives submit to your husbands, husbands love your wives. What turmoil have these words caused! Turmoil because Paul's marital advice presumes a practice of marriage which is foreign to us today. In ancient society people rarely married for love. Rather marriages were arranged by the bride and groom's family. Often enough husband and wife did not even know each other when they were married. In the ancient practice of arranged marriages love was something you grew into over the years. And while today we may love before we marry, our romantic love cannot remain what it is on our wedding day. As heady and exhilarating as young love is, it is but a pale shadow to what lies in store ahead, if both husband *and* wife continue to come to know one another ever more dearly, deal with one another ever more honestly, care for one another ever more generously, whether richer or poorer, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health till death do they part.

Paul's admonition to wives to submit to their husbands must be understood in this same context. In the ancient world women were normally married soon after reaching puberty. With the high rate of infant mortality, with famine, with war, with disease, every woman of childbearing age needed to be bearing children throughout their reproductive years just to keep the population stable. Many early Christian women who chose to remain unmarried virgins were martyred precisely because they were thought to be shirking their duty to their family, their city, their people. Men though tended to marry later—in their late twenties, around Jesus' age when he started his ministry. For a man first had to make something of himself. He had to prove to his future wife, and perhaps even more to the father of his bride that he could be counted on to be a good provider and a faithful husband. And so tradition assumes that Joseph was twice Mary's age, say Joseph in his mid-twenties and Mary in her early teens, when their families arranged their marriage. And it would have been their families who made the match. Mary may have chosen to be the Mother of God, but she likely did not have much choice over becoming the wife of Joseph. So too, Joseph may have chosen not to divorce Mary quietly when he learned she was pregnant, but I doubt it was his choice to betroth her in the first place. Their parents would have seen to that.

The age disparity between Mary and Joseph was a commonplace in the ancient world. Add to her youth, the fact that the young bride would not have received any formal education, in fact that she would not have had much experience out in the public world at all—true even today in most of the Middle East, where girls are not supposed to venture outside the home without a male relative as chaperone, knowing this one can begin to see the wisdom of wives submitting to their husband's counsel. Indeed, part of the romance of married life in the ancient world was how the husband would teach his wife about the ways of the world and how she would care for him, body, soul and spirit. It

is in this way that the wife's relationship with her husband mirrors the relationship of the Church itself to Christ.

Now we live today in a very different world. Differences between husband and wife, whether in age or in education are not nearly so great. In fact it may well be the wife who has the greater education or the better paying job in the family. Both spouses may even be of the same gender. Now such changes within the modern practice of marriage do not make Paul's words obsolete, but they do render them one-sided. Marriages are now between equals. Not only ought wives to submit to their husbands, but now husbands ought also to submit to their wives. Or to put it better, husband and wife both need to submit to the new relationship they are crafting between them, a relationship whose intimacy enables each to transcend the boundary of their own skin and embrace their beloved as their other self. Both ought to submit to the law of their mutual love—a law ultimately individual to each couple, calling for generosity and patience, humility and tenderness, honesty and forgiveness—a law in short calling for the free and unstinting gift of each to their other self.

In the first reading from the Book of Joshua we hear the voice of young love, bold and passionate, as the Jews formally choose to ally themselves to the God who had led them out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised land lying before them. In the Gospel we hear the voice of mature love, tested and true. When Jesus begins to lose followers, with the complaint that his teaching is too hard to accept, he turns to his inner circle, the Twelve, and asks them if they too will desert him. Simon Peter steps forward. He does not deny that Jesus teaching is hard. But speaking out of the kind of grounded committed love that we can only pray all marriages can mature into, he simply says “To whom else shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life.”

Now the teaching that people were finding so hard to accept was not that of Paul's first reading, of course, but of what we have heard over the past couple of weeks from the Gospel of John—that Jesus is the bread of life, and that to share in that life, we must commit ourselves wholly to him. That we are called to become his very flesh and lifeblood, the very Body of Christ, in our day for our own family and friends, neighbors and colleagues, as well as to those beyond our own social circle, to those without family and friends, the shamed and the shunned, the nobodies in our society.

May we all be blessed with a love that never ceases to mature and ripen, deepen and broaden, a love whose roots intertwine and whose blooms cross pollinate our diverse souls. May we do so by drawing upon the grace and power, the life and love of our common beloved, Christ, that at the hour of our death when we behold the face of God, we can only repeat Peter's words, “To whom else shall we go?” We are yours, as you are ours.