

Palm Sunday
March 24, 2024
Wholly in Submission
Philippians 2:5-11

Submission is a tough word today.

Whenever I do a wedding ceremony you can always see the look of consternation on the face of the people when I say, “Name of Bride will you have this man to be your wedded husband, to live together in the holy estate of matrimony as God ordained it? *Will you submit to him...*”

Now, this is typically the moment when I get a good read of the room because I am not looking at the bride at all. We have already prepared for this moment. We have discussed at length the beauty of her submission and his sacrifice both fulfilling the roles of the Church as the bride and Christ as the groom. Rather, at this moment, I am paying attention to the crowd, especially if it is a largely unchurched crowd, so I am prepared for the inevitable confrontations that I can expect to experience at the reception.

And over the years it has been all over the board. Some have come up and confronted me directly on how archaic and inappropriate submission is in the modern era of feminism. Some have just shot me with looks of disdain and disapproval, some of whom were warm and delightfully cordial before the ceremony, but nothing but seething antagonism afterwards! And some asked why the groom’s vow didn’t require him to submit to his wife when she had to submit to him?

Indeed, our culture does not understand submission. If you are confused as well, hopefully I can clear that up for you today.

At the time of the writing of this letter to the church in Philippi, the Roman empire was an empire driven by slavery. Now this meant many different things depending on where the slave was and what they did. Many slaves were captured in battle and used for gladiatorial games in the arenas in most major cities. Some sold themselves into slavery to position themselves in better circumstances, or to work off a debt, or to simply achieve an opportunity to become an independent Roman Citizen. Some were captured or sold by slave traders from all over, outside the empire, to do the menial tasks around the city, or on the farm, or even the houses of ill repute, where they all had little or no hope of freedom ever again. Regardless of the circumstances by which they became a slave, once they were a slave, they had to obey.

In fact, obedience was absolute. When disobedience was detected, the Roman authorities were more than prepared to put down the revolt. The most famous revolt was Spartacus, who brilliantly raised up the best fighters from Gladiators who almost took Rome. But the Roman Army was able to defeat this slave revolt and the slave army was crucified for all to see lining the streets into Rome.

Indeed, obedience was absolute. But they did not have to submit. You see, submission is what a man who is free does. Submission is done willingly, joyfully, and in love for the one you submit to. Submission adores, trusts, and knows that submission is never in vain, because the one they submit to loves them and cherishes them as well.

This is the spirit of true submission in marriage. The beautiful bride submitting to her beloved because she knows without a doubt he loves her enough to die for her.

Today our Philippians passage points out our Savior's willingness to submit to the cage of human covering so He could be with us humans just as we are. What wondrous love is this that He demonstrates to us, having been the divine power of the universe, willingly submitting to the pain, sadness, and suffering that every human body affords.

What an incredible submission out of love for us that He would give up such eternal glory to participate in such temporal humility. And to even suffer and die the most excruciating death possible, so that those who believe in Him would not have to.

You see this passage was never about our submission, it is about Christ submitting to His circumstances.

In the military, it's called embracing the muck... only we don't say muck. This means when the weather is terrible, when the conditions are the worst, when everything is messed up beyond all recognition, the soldier dives in headfirst with love. This is love for his fellow soldiers, love for his country he joined to fight for, and love for the family he left behind.

As Thomas Paine once said, "I prefer peace. But if trouble must come, let it come in my time, so that my children can live in peace."

And Thomas knew what he was talking about having been a French revolutionary who arrived in America just in time to participate with the American Declaration of Independence from Great Briton.

Jesus understood this even better than Thomas ever could. He left the most peaceful existence of all to do actual spiritual warfare with the enemy of humankind so we, His children, could have peace forever with our heavenly Father. And if anyone embraced the muck of spiritual warfare, our Jesus did. Persecuted, ostracized, rejected, abused, and finally executed for the crime of being the best human being that ever lived. This is why the life we now live is a life of submission overall. We submit in everything because of Christ's submission for us.

Last week Megan Knittle and I were talking after church on Saturday in the courtyard, when all of a sudden Megan's facial expression changed. Initially I was worried I'd said something that offended her. (As you know from last week's sermon, not an uncommon experience for me.) But, then she motioned ever so subtly to something happening behind me and said, "I think someone needs you."

Now, you all know how focused I am when I am talking to someone, so I was a little annoyed that someone would be so rude as to interrupt someone's conversation with me. Everyone gets such a limited amount of time with me, when they get it, they should get to have it until they don't need it anymore. So, I only looked around to tell whoever it was I would be with them in a moment. And, when I did, I understood exactly why Megan thought I should break off my conversation with her and attend to the individual behind me.

He was homeless man with all his earthly possessions tied to his bike, sitting astride the bike as he had just ridden into the courtyard looking for the pastor. He was filthy from his riding around, he was quite unkempt, and I am sure, for some, a little intimidating in his appearance. I knew him instantly as I had seen him around before and had a pretty good idea what he might need from me as soon as I recognized him.

I glanced back at Megan and said, "Yah, I should probably deal with this."

And I did. He was looking for services and I indicated just how we were able to meet his needs.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, that is submission. Lovingly submitting ourselves to the wants and needs of anyone that may request it. In fact, submitting ourselves to everyone. Everyone is in need because everyone is our neighbor.

We submit ourselves to everyone who works for us or that we are tasked with supervising because we know that our love for them makes them successful. It makes them who they are supposed to be for the organization we are tasked with working for and making it successful.

We even submit to prisoners, enemies, the wayward and erring because our love for them supersedes their hatred and disdain for us.

And we submit all in the name of Christ because it is not our submitting that is a credit to us, rather it is Christ living in us that submitted first for us so we could live in love and peace with our neighbors through our submission to them.

So, we stand at the altar of Christ as a bride adorned for her husband. We are the Church that submits to our eternal husband in Christ Jesus. And we know that He is our eternal husband because of His submission to His circumstances that got Him crucified.

Rising from the dead, He showed that His submission was a holy submission that makes our endeavors to submit holy as well, so we are wholly in submission to everyone.

AMEN.

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