

Sermon Title: Living Into the Dance
Text: Ephesians 5:21-6:9

Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
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Some of you may remember that this summer's preaching has been something of an experiment for me, as to what it might be like to preach outside the common lectionary. Next week the experiment will end, and I'd welcome your thoughts and reflections on what it felt like, from a hearing point of view, to try to listen just to this one part of the New Testament, the letter to the Ephesians, instead of the more dabbling effect of looking to a set of assigned readings each week. It *has* been an interesting process for me. It has opened many doors on the one hand, and on the other hand reminded me of why I have mostly chosen to go through other doors. "Thanks," is, I guess what I'm trying to say, for indulging this preacher's whim.

One of the stock reasons I have given when asked why I tend to focus on the lectionary is that it makes me deal with parts of Scripture that I would otherwise avoid. The discipline of assigned readings is that you at least have to see what one or the other Gospels has to say about Jesus, and it lifts up especially parts of the Old Testament that might otherwise stay pretty well tucked away in the attic. But this week I realized that committing as I have to a systematic reading of a particular part of the New Testament could bring the very same reward. I can all but guarantee that if the lectionary had offered the end of the fifth chapter of Ephesians and the beginning of the sixth, one of the first things I would have done is checked out what the Gospel lesson was for the week, or whether I had an option of a good juicy story from the life of David. But the fact of the matter—I did a quick check to verify this—is that the lectionary itself would have bailed me. The assigned text for August 20 of this year would have been the first verses of Chapter five, ending with verse 20. The readings for August 27 would have taken up at the tenth verse of chapter 6. I'd have been off the hook if I'd not pushed the point!

I was frankly amazed, and then thought, well, what we've read this morning is pretty much a copy of another section of Paul's letters—the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth chapters of Colossians. No need for both passages to be in the lectionary, but the fact of the matter is that *this* part of the New Testament is nowhere to be found in the lectionary, either! Strange thought, huh? Because I'm guessing that the verses we read sound pretty familiar to you all! As much as these words are forged into our mental maps of God's Word, it's been at least ten years since we've taken time in worship to wonder about their meaning for our lives. So much for the lectionary assuring that we deal with the hard parts!

And it *is* a hard part of scripture, isn't it? For me, these words will always be associated with a book that Denise and I received as a wedding gift—with a study guide—entitled, *The Christian Family*. For that author, these words were a literal blueprint for the way in which a faithful family is to be formed: husband in uncontested first position, wife dutifully subservient, children sitting quietly at the table and speaking only when spoken to. Ask Denise about "fresh coffee, compliments of Christ" to get an idea of just how far *that* plan went in *our* house.

Some, to be sure, will argue that the fact that this paradigm of family has frayed is one of the leading causes for the deterioration of Western civilization, and there are, for equally to be sure, pockets of the Christian family where the role of women is restricted to the kitchen and teaching

of children by virtue of this text. But I'm proud of the fact that my entire life has been lived in a church that has consciously sought to affirm the leadership gifts of women, and the wisdom of youth; that abhors slavery and all its effects, and which sees the family of God as a gathering of equals, rather than a forced march set to a patriarchal cadence. Ephesians 5:21 – 6:9 is unequivocally a part of my bible, and I'm mildly disturbed by my awakened awareness that it's not been a part of the readings that have guided my preaching through the years, but that most emphatically does *not* mean that I think God's word to us today is that it's our job to push women and children back into molds that have mercifully been broken. What it means, I suspect, is that we have to listen a little more closely if we're going to understand what it *means*.

My first observation would be that whenever I hear these verses quoted, I think they start with verse 22, with a marked emphasis on verse 23. "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife just as Christ is head of the church!" But might I humbly suggest that if started there, either as the proof text for a Christian paradigm for family life, *or* as a punch line for how silly and antiquated the Pauline church was, we are missing the point that this letter is trying to make. I am convinced that any reading of this portion of the New Testament *must* begin where the *thought* begins, and that's verse 21: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."

Honesty requires that I make at least a mental footnote that strictly speaking, verse 21 doesn't stand alone, but is itself integrally related to the three verses that precede it, but I don't think *my* point is weakened by the connection. What I think we need to understand, if we are to hear what these words we've read are trying to say to us, is that the images of household which are raised are intended not to *make* a point but to *illustrate* one. It's not that the misogynist Paul wanted to keep women in their place, and brought the rhetorical force of Christ as Head of the Church to bear in order to keep them there. It's that Paul understood that the relationships that *must* be present if the church is ever to be truly the church are not relationships of *domination*, but of literally placing ourselves *beneath* each other—*grounding* each other—with *only* Christ as our head. "Be subject to one another out of reverence for *Christ!*"

The best *example* Paul could think of to illustrate just how this self-giving might look came from the households out of which each of the members of this small community of faith in Ephesus had come—the households that had nurtured and cared for them, and brought them to life. To be sure, these were households in which the male was dominant, and in which children were viewed, not only as precious lives entrusted to their care, but also their business plan and retirement savings all rolled up into one. It was a household in which the presence of slaves would not have been infrequent.

But the point was not to justify the order of that day, much less to provide definitive justification for the institution of slavery, or a proof text for spousal abuse or a carte blanche for child abuse. It was, in fact, precisely the opposite: that in *all* our relationships, we are ourselves *bound* as slaves to Christ, to see and know the other, not from the top down—what can they do for *us*—but from the bottom up and from side to side: what can we do for each other that would show the love of God in Christ that grounds not only us, but all creation?

So it's not that the order of the universe puts man over woman over child over slave, but that when we finally get this "being church" right, the order of our universe will reflect the new law that was shown to us in Christ, in which our fundamental calling is not to *dominate* the world, but to pour ourselves out on behalf of it, in love. Again, I found myself search for a picture of what this might mean.

Some of you know that one of the gifts of Lisa's wedding for my life is that it pushed me to step about as far out of my comfort zone as I've been in a long, long time. I knew that at the reception a moment would come when the father of the bride would be called upon to dance with his daughter. I knew, as well, that the father of the bride would rather face a firing squad than dance with a hundred or more of his family and best friends looking on. That meant that for the past nine months I have been trying to screw up enough courage to walk into a dance studio and ask for help.

I put it off as long as I possibly could, so a week before the wedding rehearsal, there I was, at Adagio Dance Studio, as self-conscious as if I were standing naked at the corner of College and Meade. One of the first things they told me, no doubt seeing the fear in my eyes like a deer in the high beams, was that if I somehow managed to step on Denise's toes, it was *her* fault! In ballroom dance, it is the *man* who leads, and the lady who follows! Erase a hundred years of progress toward women's rights, and pure common sense that would dictate that the one of two who might have some clue of what's going on should be in charge. My first thought was of another verse from one of the Gospels—something about the blind leading the blind, but then I thought of this "household code", and just what it might mean to be called to *lead*.

What had been one of the cruel jokes of our marriage, that someone who loves to dance as much as Denise was stuck with someone who feared it as much as I, became something of a gift, because she somehow manages to follow my lead when I haven't a clue what I'm doing. I'm not ready for prime time, but what I have learned is that being the lead in a dance doesn't mean you get to do whatever you want. It means someone you love is doing what you're doing, "backwards and in heels" as Ginger Rogers pointed out. And I wonder if that is not precisely what Paul had in mind for those who would be a part of this body of Christ in the world: not a hierarchy of domination, bent on molding the world to my whim, but providing the foundation, and direction *to each other*—be subject *to one another*, is what the letter says—so that together we can truly embody God's saving and sustaining love.

I've had another dance of sorts in my mind that confirms this suspicion. September 11 has for the last five years been synonymous with a deadly sort of pirouette that has gripped our world since four airliners changed everything and nothing about the world we live in. But thirty-five years before *that* September 11, 40 years ago tomorrow, there was something of a dance that left an old, beloved, but outdated sanctuary on the corner of College and Drew, and made its way those few short blocks into a new, not entirely completed sanctuary on the corner of College and Meade.

We tend to forget, I think, because this space has been ours for so long, that that movement was a leap for the people who made it. They couldn't quite afford this grand new building, but they realized that if they were going to continue to lead this community, it was something they had to

do. They needed more room for worshippers, and especially for children and young people, for Sunday School classes and fellowship. We are the fortunate heirs of their vision, and now it's our turn to lead in the way they led, not by asking what the church could do for them, or give them, but by seeking to discern as a community how their resources could lay a ground work for faithfulness for generations to come.

It's leadership, not in terms of how we can dominate or force others into a particular mold; not in terms of how we can make this church serve *us*, but more like me, desperately trying to remember if it's "long, long, quick, quick" or "triple step, triple step, back step" to a beat that comes from beyond me, and every now and then just might make us laugh—make us less self-conscious—because we're moving together in the way that God intends. It's not about men, and women, children and slaves all "minding their places", but about all of us, subject to each other, finding the ways in which our lives can live into the dance of the Spirit, creating a time, and a space, that is *Holy*.

Memorial, as we begin a new year together, full of hope, and promise...shall we dance?

Let us pray.