

Good Enough Mothers; Good Enough News

Ephesians 5:21-6:9 Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. ²⁴Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. ²⁸In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body. ³¹For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. ³²This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. ³³Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ²‘Honour your father and mother’—this is the first commandment with a promise: ³‘so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.’

And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; ⁶not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. ⁷Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, ⁸knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.

And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality.

So, ah, I know Mother’s day isn’t really a church holiday. But given the importance of moms in our lives I almost always try and find a text about moms or at least one that relates to women. Since we’ve going through the Bible book by book, this week it was Ephesians’ turn. And I tell you what- I did my best. I really did. I looked

and looked and read and read...but pretty much the only thing in Ephesians that relates to women's experience is the famous, or perhaps I should say infamous, passage here in Ephesians 5: wives be subject to your husbands.

Now, since you make such fun of me for saying every text is my favorite, let me hasten to tell you this is definitely NOT one of my favs. Quite the opposite, actually.

This is one of those texts known as a clobber text, or a hammer text- one that's been used like a weapon to beat women down, to beat people down for centuries.

Howard Thurman, the mentor to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was raised by his grandmother. Every day she had him read the Bible to her, but never anything from Paul. One day he finally asked her why. Well she had grown up as a slave, and she said the plantation owner only read from Paul, particularly from passages like this one telling women and slaves to stay put, and she made a promise to herself that if she ever got out of that situation and had a choice about it- she'd never hear from brother Paul again. Certainly not a text like this.

Can you blame her? No, this is one of those texts that whenever I come across it makes me wonder about the Bible, sometimes makes me wonder even what I'm doing as a pastor. I mean wives obey your husbands? Slaves obey your masters? Really? This is good news?

Now, of course there's always more to scripture than meets the eye. I mean you know me- there are all sorts of creative ways I like to read the text. There are all sorts of scholarly tools at our disposal. It's one of the best things about being Presbyterian.

For instance we can always read a text in Greek to see if that helps uncover any meaning. And of course we should always try thinking about a text in relationship to the culture and see if that helps any. And of course we can read a text in comparison with other letters from Paul and the rest of Scripture, too. There all sorts of possibilities.

Well believe me- this week I tried done it all. I turned over every rock. I tried looking at this thing from every angle.

Now right off the bat I'll tell you the Greek was a disappointment. Often it's the case that a word in Greek actually means something slightly different than the English word used in translation. But, honestly, that just isn't really the case here. We just don't really have any words that sound one way in English but really connote something else in the original- like maybe somehow the word for obey in Greek doesn't really mean 'obey' but something more like 'rebel' or 'talk back to' or 'yes, dear, I am going shopping with the credit card, and if you don't like it the sofa will work just great for you tonight' or some other nuance like that. ☺

No the Greek is pretty clear. Obey means obey. Women are supposed to submit and obey. So are children and slaves. And yeah, the husbands and parents and masters are supposed to be nice and caring...but they aren't supposed to give up their place.

So, no luck there. What about reading it against cultural backdrop? I thought maybe that could help. And it does- sort of. It is true IN COMPARISON with the Roman world around him, this household code, is pretty progressive. Romans did not think about marriage in any kind of Romantic way like we do with our movie ideas about people marrying for love and being this kind of this union of equals united in passion. No, in Roman and Jewish law, wives were literally considered to be the property of their husbands.

If you ever doubt this you just have to look at the ancient understanding of adultery. In our world adultery is when either partner strays from a marriage. Not so in the ancient world- including the Bible. It was perfectly legal and permissible for husbands to have multiple partners outside of the marriage. Adultery was what happened when the wife strays, when the property strays. Period.

And so it's true that Paul is speaking a somewhat radical word here by saying husbands ought to love their wives as much as Christ loves the church. That's no small thing- it's definitely an improvement.

But, like we said earlier, while husbands and fathers and slave masters are supposed to be nice and loving- they're still on top. There's nothing like what we hear in Galatians where Paul says there is no longer male and female and slave or free. There's nothing like that here at all.

And we could keep going like this. But to cut a long exegetical story short, it was the same with every other way I tried to read this text searching for something that

sounded like good news. No matter what angle I tried- I was always left frustrated and annoyed.

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Well after a few days of being frustrated, I just decided to stop thinking about the text for a little while and think about Mother's Day instead. I didn't know if it would really help with the sermon, but I just needed something nicer to think about. 😊

And it turned out this was a good thing to do. This week, in thinking about mothers I found myself thinking about D.W Winnicott. Winnicott was an incredibly famous English child psychologist with his own BBC show in the 40's and 50's. He was basically England's version of Dr. Spock- helping literally thousands of thousands of young moms figure out what to do with these wonderful, terrifying little babies in their arms.

Winnicott came up with ideas that we still talk about today. For instance he was the one who first talked about the importance of children have transitional objects- you know, blankies or stuffed animals. Previous to Winnicott doctors emphasized discipline and self-reliance and warned parents against being too gentle with their children lest they grow up soft. Winnicott, on the other hand, realized these transitional objects didn't make children soft- they helped them learn how to make attachments and actually grow into stronger, less fearful adults.

But Winnicott's most interesting idea to me, though, is his idea of the "good-enough mother". The good-enough mother. Winnicott says every mom, today we would

say parent, but in his day it was pretty much all moms- every mom is tempted to be what he calls the “perfect mother”. The perfect mother tries to do whatever she can for her child- when they cry she picks them up, when they fall she wipe their tears, whatever the child needs she always helps. And after a while, he says, nearly every part of this child’s life is protected and cared for by this perfect mother who never fails.

Well, the interesting thing is that Winnicott says as nice as this sounds, as nice as it sounds to anticipate every need and help with every problem- being a perfect mother is not actually a good thing. It’s not good for the mom because it’s just an impossibly high bar- and she’s killing herself trying to be something no one can really be. And, more interestingly, it’s not good for the child. Winnicott said it’s not good for the child either- because when someone is always around, always helping, always smoothing things over, and fighting every battle- well how on earth can the kid ever grow up? How can you ever succeed if you’re never allowed to fail?

And so better than the perfect mother is what Winnicott calls the “good-enough mother”. Isn’t that a great term- the good-enough mother? Now, the good-enough mother cares for her child. She makes sure they are safe- that they have enough to eat. But this mother isn’t perfect- she doesn’t even try. As the child grows up, she isn’t always around when there’s a problem. She won’t always have the right things to say. In fact sometimes she is downright frustrating and annoying. And because of this- the children have to figure some things on their own. They have to grow up. And they learn along the way how to love their moms even when they’re frustrating and annoying,

which prepares them for a world of people who are often good, and often frustrating and annoying.

Good enough mothers, Winnicott says, are, well, good enough. In fact they're the best.

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In two weeks I'm headed to Nashville for the Festival of Homiletics. This will be my third year in a row. The Festival is great- all my old friends from seminary come out. And we get to bask in some of the greatest preaching in the world- and best of all, we just get to sit there!

Now, as you'd guess, most of the time the speakers are amazing. Last year Bishop Tutu kicked us off, and he didn't speak long, and his message was very basic- you are a child of God. But it was the way he said it. He kept saying it over and over with his eyes popping out of his head, looking and sounding for all the world like Yoda after 9 cups of coffee. "You are a child of God- DO YOU BELIEVE IT? He-he-he!" And it was amazing- just to be in his presence.

But, do you know- the sermon that was the most helpful was one that actually wasn't all that amazing. After Bishop Tutu was done, Barbara Brown Taylor was up. Now Barbara Brown Taylor- she is absolutely one of the most incredible preachers out there. She is famous for her shaping, her craft of the written word- she paints these word pictures in vivid colors, and bold lines- every sermon a poem. But, for whatever reason, the night she was speaking to us, she seemed tired, small, toned down. Now, she offered

up a very good sermon- but not a great one. In fact as we were leaving I heard many people shake their heads and talk about how disappointed they were.

But do you know, I felt just the opposite. I felt just the opposite. Because there, in front of over two thousand people, two thousand preachers, in front of her colleagues from around the world- Barbara Brown Taylor allowed herself to be good enough. She could have easily done more that night- she could have opened up that bag of awesomeness she has and pulled out something just mind blowing. She could have. But she didn't. She just very simply, and very calmly, stood before us- and offered us something better- she offered us good enough.

And do you know this meant more to me than had she just blown us all away. See, I love preaching. I do. And there's a part of me, not necessarily a good part of me, that just wants every sermon to be amazing- I just want every sermon to be honest, and heart felt, and meaningful, and of course Biblical, engaging, and fresh- and of course all within 15 minutes. There's a part of me that wants every sermon to just be perfect. And of course I know in my head how ridiculous that is, how arrogant. And I certainly know in my soul how exhausting it can be some weeks. But it seems to be a part of me for now. So, what a gift it was to see this incredible preacher not just tell me but show me that all any of us need to do, all any of us are asked to be who we are- and sometimes that means being good enough.

And when I thought about this- that's when it hit me. That's when it hit me. All this work I was going through this week with this text, with this irritating, annoying text- why was I trying so hard to turn it into something more than it is? Why was I trying to make Paul out to be the perfect apostle when honestly, in spite of this passage, he's really a pretty good one. Good enough anyway.

I know there's a part of us, a part of me anyway, that would like everything in scripture to just be wonderful- giving us passage after passage of wisdom, truth, and beauty. There is a part of us that wishes scripture were perfect.

But, the truth is Scripture, and certainly Paul, they are more like a good enough mother than a perfect one. Honestly, they give us so much. Paul gives us so much- if all we had was Romans 8, that nothing, nothing in heaven or earth can separate us from God. That would be enough- it would. Paul gives us so much- BUT he's also irritating sometimes. He's frustrating. And with a text like this, wives be subject to your husbands and slaves obey your masters- well, I think he's just plain wrong sometimes, too. I do.

But like Winnicott's good enough mother, without such irritations- how would we grow? The good news this morning isn't really in this text- it's in allowing ourselves to disagree with parts of Paul, but still honor, and in my case love the rest of him, and learn how, by the grace of God, that this is good enough.

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When you leave here today and go out to lunch or dinner- give thanks for your moms. Be grateful for what they were able to give you. Grieve the gifts they weren't

able to bless you with, and the wounds you received from them along the way. But don't be angry with them today because they weren't perfect. No mom ever was. And indeed, the very best of them, the very best- they are better than perfect. They are good. And good, by God, is good enough. **Amen.**