

March 7, 2010  
Ephesians 5: 21-6:10  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick  
© Mary E. Baard

## Paul: Household Living

### INTRO TO SCRIPTURE

We are in the third week of a four week sermon series on the Apostle Paul. The first two weeks we have seen how Paul transformed from a person who understood God's care to be confined to the Jewish people to a traveling evangelist who wanted everyone to know of the expansive grace he had experienced in Christ Jesus.

The Apostle Paul founded many churches and visited other communities of Christians. After he moved on, he would often write letters of encouragement and instruction back to the people. Those letters dealt with all aspects of people's lives - church life and home life.

Of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament, most scholars agree that seven of them come from Paul directly. The rest are often called Deutero-Paul (meaning second Paul.) They come from followers of Paul. This seems strange to us today, but it was common practice in those days. In fact, it was more respectful to use your teacher's name than your own in writings where you would be expanding on what had been shared with you.

Ephesians is one of the Deutero-Paul letters, not from Paul directly. However, it does expand on some threads of material we find in Paul's letters. It struggles with how to live a new life in Christ in the midst of the realities of the present culture.

Today's reading from Ephesians is one that we will not find in the lectionary selection of readings. It is a passage where we will recognize certain verses that are often taken out of context with destructive results. Let us listen carefully to all that the passage has to say.

*(scripture reading.)*

Our uneasiness about this passage and the layers of struggle embedded in the passage itself and in the two thousand year history of interpretations of this writing is often evidenced in humorous quips, such as the T-shirts and bumper stickers which say, "I'm the boss. My wife said I could be."

Have you noticed how humor is based on the blessings and burdens of our everyday life? The comic strips in the newspaper mostly depict household interactions -exchanges between partners, parents and children, owners and pets. They are humorous because they uncover the real people we are, rather than the dressed up, put together people we try to present in public.

I've been following the cartoon ZITS for many years. It is about a teenager, Jeremy, and his parents trying to coexist. One of the common themes has to do with Jeremy's proficiency with technology and his parent's ineptness in this area. They are always buffaloed; and he's baffled at their stupidity. As a parent, I resemble that struggle. To our children it all seems obvious. I'm like Jeremy's parents – I just want the stuff to work.

One of you sent me an email this week which included this definition of the word justice. "Justice is when kids have kids of their own." I'm hoping the writers of ZITS will show Jeremy as a parent someday, with his parents enjoying the scene.

Each generation has its struggles with the generation who came before it. And each older generation has things to learn from the next. The teaching and the learning go in both directions. When we read scripture we are in dialogue with many, many, many generations who have come before us.

For those who believe we should read scripture as the literal word of God, the passage we read today, along with many other passages in the Bible, is very problematic. Just to begin with, it accepts slavery as a norm, which is antithetical to our convictions today.

On the other hand, if we understand scripture as people's witness to their experiences of God's presence in their lives and their theological reflections on those experiences, then we are called to engage in full dialogue with them, bringing our own experiences and theological reflections to the table, trusting that the Spirit is with us in the process.

So, what was going on for the people who wrote and read the letter to the Ephesians? They lived in a culture where the teachings of people like Arius Didymus, a 1<sup>st</sup> century Aristotelian philosopher, were prominent. He wrote:  
*The man has the rule of the 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.*  
(*Hellenistic Commentary to the NT*, Boring, Berger, Colpe, pg. 530)

Hellenistic discussions of household management, tracing back to Aristotle, address only one person – the *pater familias* – the father of the family. We know from other evidence that there were many households headed by women, but they were not considered the norm or the ideal. So the dominant perspective was that the father of the family was in charge of his wife, his children and his servants/slaves. In fact he was considered to be the only fully human person, and he had complete say over everyone else's lives.

There were household codes to describe the appropriate management of the family. They could be summarized:

- Wives are subject to their husbands
- Children obey their fathers (even when they are adults)
- Slaves obey their masters

These are the phrases that jump out at us from today's reading in Ephesians. They make us cringe, because we know how these phrases have been misused in the Christian community itself and taken out of context in such a fashion that they have perpetuated domestic violence, child neglect and abuse. They have also been used to support slavery itself in our own past and in other parts of the world today. We should be outraged by these facts and we should do all we can to work for justice in these areas.

Yet, it is important to realize that these household codes that we find in scripture are not instructions that have arisen from Paul or the early followers of Jesus. They are the norms for behavior in the general culture of that time. What is interesting and significant is how Paul, and those who are students of his, adapt and reinterpret these household codes.

In today's reading we can see that there is far greater mutuality than is embedded in the secular household codes. To begin with the father **and** the mother, the children and the servant/slaves are all addressed.

The passage begins with *Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ*, which sets the tone for what is to come. There is a counter-instruction to each of the household codes.

- *Husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies.*
- *Fathers should not provoke their children to anger.*
- *Masters are to stop threatening their slaves.*

The passage ends by affirming that with God *there is no partiality*.

When we listen carefully to the whole passage we see evidence of Paul's teaching on this matter which is found in Galatians 3:28, (which is considered to be directly from Paul),

*There is no longer Jew nor Gentile,  
slave nor free  
male nor female,  
you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

Throughout his writings, Paul gives evidence to a radical reorienting of human relationships toward an ethic of equality and mutual respect. For Paul, Christ Jesus has broken down social barriers, thus revealing the essential human worth and dignity of each person. This is a radical new way of viewing the world.

Paul himself however is human and we see evidence of his ongoing struggle with how this is actually lived out in his day and time. For instance in his letter to Philemon, considered to be a Pauline letter, he encourages respectful and kind treatment for the returning slave, although he never challenges the institution of slavery itself.

Jesus interacted with others in a radically equalitarian and loving way, offering both compassionate care and profound challenge. After Jesus died his followers found that hard to

do. Over the centuries Christians have struggled in each time and place with the constructs of their culture on the one hand and life in Christ on the other.

In our culture today, the pendulum has swung way over to the side of focusing on the rights and freedom of the individual.

We know that there are still far too many children who experience abuse and neglect. On the other hand, there are also children who rule the roost. In our desire to affirm our children we have sometimes let them run wild. All you have to do is watch *Super Nanny* to see parents caught in the throws of perpetual tantrums and manipulation. Affirmation does not mean forgetting the need for mutual respect, which is the essence of the message in Ephesians. It is important to affirm the individuals in a family, but it is also important to affirm and respect the life of the whole family so that the family itself may be whole and well.

A woman I know has really struggled with this in dealing with her young adult son who was using black tar heroin. When she found out, she realized he had been lying for some time. She instituted regular drug tests. She told all her friends so she would get support. She created a support group at church for parents of teens who were using drugs. Her son went to in-patient therapy. He wasn't allowed to return to her house when he got out. It has been a challenging journey to respect one another **and** care for one another. At this point he is clean with a regular job. He is not living at home. Yet he is welcomed into her home and to extended family gatherings with open arms. They love him.

May God give us the courage, wisdom and humor to embody the love of Christ one to another.