

By Father Charles Bowes

Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17
Ephesians 5:21-32
John 6:60-69

Just how much of ourselves do we want to give up?

“How can you take these words seriously?” the folks in John chapter 6 ask. This question is actually a complaint about Jesus' claim that he is food and drink, but it serves as a wry comment on the passage from Ephesians chapter 5, our second reading. Talk about words hard to endure!

“Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as if to the Lord because the husband is head of his wife, just as Christ is head of his body the Church, as well as its Savior. As the Church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loves the Church. He gave himself up for her. ...Husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.”

“Does it shake your faith?” Jesus asks. It probably shakes many of us. Deference and reverence, first of all, are not prominent nouns in our contemporary dictionary of privileged words.

More troublesome yet, “wives should be subordinate to their husbands.” This sounds like fingernails on a blackboard. Feels like sandpaper on

wounds. Tastes like abuse. Smells like patriarchy. Subordination has been the problem. Why pose it as a solution?

Clearly there is a context for St. Paul's words to the Ephesians. Christ is compared to the husband, the Church to the wife. The man is the head, the woman the body. This analogy has been acclaimed by some who want to legitimize the privileged imaging of the male for Christ. But this idea has been roundly condemned by others, who see it as a devaluation of women. Both positions are worth examining, but what is the real theme of this scripture passage? “Deference” and “reverence” are its context. All the rest is application. We are all to defer to and revere one another. Then St. Paul provides applications that may or may not be historically bound.

But it is deference we have trouble with, “subordination.” It sticks in the craw. Why should any of us have to be subordinate to another or put someone else first? What is worse, St. Paul seems to commend obedience only to the woman. He tells the wives to be subordinate. What about the men?

Well, what about them? This is what St. Paul said: give yourself up for her. Love your spouse as your own body, your very self. If husbands were to hold such an attitude, it would subvert all dominance and hierarchy.

St. Paul's is a radical statement of equality, albeit in his own contemporary context. It is self-destroying to abuse, to hurt, to degrade the spouse.

The point is this: there may be suggestions of male dominance in our second reading today, but this conclusion collapses from internal contradiction. Both husband and wife are to put the other first.

What if this rankles us the most? The very idea that we must give ourselves to another, defer to another! If we love each other as we propose, we assuredly must die to ourselves. The first casualty of real commitment is the ego we are so reluctant to tame.

"Decide today whom you will serve," challenges Joshua in chapter 24. In marriage, as in life, we serve not only each other, but our very God, who wants of us not slavery, but the free gift of our love.

Someone once wrote: "The smallest package in the world is the person who is all wrapped up in himself or herself."

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we want to give up?