

Hold the Vision

[Ephesians 2:11-22](#)

[Mark 6:30-34, 53-56](#)

Today we see two different pictures of the followers of Jesus. In the Gospel we heard how the apostles gathered around Jesus and told him how their mission trips had gone. You may remember that a couple of weeks ago we heard Jesus sending them out two by two without any extra provisions or clothing. Now they're back, excited about their experiences. This is very immediate and personal, and then all the people are rushing about trying to get their sick relatives to Jesus as quickly as possible.

Its quite a contrast with the reading from Ephesians. By now the church has grown, Jesus is long since resurrected and ascended and his followers are dealing with very different challenges. Scholars differ in their thinking about when this book was written. Some think that Paul wrote it at the end of his life, others that it was written quite a bit later. He is not writing to eager young missionaries but to a church struggling with racism.

The Jesus movement started within Judaism and gradually separated out. Most early Christians were observant Jews. They were unwilling to mix with Gentiles because they believed it made them unclean. You will remember that in Acts, Peter had a dream in which God told him not to consider *unclean* things that God called *clean* which led him to embrace Gentiles as part of the Christian church. The apostle Paul considered himself the apostle to the Gentiles and it seems that in many of the churches he found racist animosity between the Jewish members and the Gentile members. Observant Jews were bound to keep the law and thought that Christians must do the same. But that would mean that all Gentiles would have to convert to Judaism in order to be Christian.

The letter to the Romans is Paul's attempt to work out this argument as tactfully as possible; Paul both affirms the law of Moses *and* says that for Christians it is superseded by the grace of God in Jesus. The letter of Ephesians echoes this understanding. Paul declares that we are all one in Christ – that in Christ there is peace between Jew and Gentile.

I'm going to come back to that, but first I want to mention two other things about Ephesians. Well it's one really - Ephesians upholds patriarchy. It is in Ephesians that we find a key verse used to justify slavery; Ephesians 6:5 says "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ," and it is Ephesians which contains the domestic code that starts "Wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord."

This idea of being subject to another person is anathema to us as 21st Century Americans. We value personal freedom very highly. Subjection speaks to us of violence, of being treated as less than human, of being oppressed and hurt. We see it in the behavior of law-enforcement who treat people differently depending on their skin tone – we see it in the attitudes of so many people who think that their group is superior to another group. Yes, even Episcopalians can think we're superior and when we think we're superior it means someone else is lesser and then it's only a small step to thinking they should do what we do and it's only another small step to acting that way.

So this Letter to the Ephesians which we are reading for the next six weeks both helps and hinders us as we apply it to the church today. How are we to deal with it?

We can disregard it altogether, or look at the text within its own culture as best we can, and/or we can look for a spiritual message that may be contained within it even as we disagree with the surface meaning of the words.

I started this morning talking about the difference between the disciples of Jesus in the gospel reading where they are in his immediate physical presence, and the disciples of Jesus in Ephesus a generation or more later. The disciples were concerned about unclean spirits and healing, the Ephesians were grappling with racism and infighting. Two millennia later, our understanding of the gospel of Jesus is again different, and we are attempting to apply it to circumstances which the first disciples never began to imagine. So it makes sense to consider the text as being a response to its own time – its own cultural context - as well as being spiritual teaching.

As Christians we always look at things through the lens of Jesus' teaching. He taught us to love God and our neighbor as ourselves so that is the basic way we interpret scripture. What is the most loving interpretation of this passage?

There is no way that the most loving interpretation of the difficult passages of Ephesians is to uphold slavery, or to oppress women. In fact, quite the opposite, Paul's words are directions to the oppressed – to the slaves and to the wives, telling them to find Christ in those who have power over them. "Slaves, obey your earthly masters *as you obey Christ,*" and "Wives be subject to your husbands *as you are to the Lord.*" We can interpret that as telling us something very simple. Always come from love. Even when people are oppressing you, come from love.

This is one of the hardest things to do. It is easy for us humans to see everything that's wrong in another person, especially ones with whom we disagree. It's easy for us to carry resentment. It's hard for us to love our oppressors, our enemies. Yet we follow Jesus who told us to forgive not once, not twice but so often that we lose count, and to love our enemies so much that we pray for them. Yet at the same time, Jesus taught us to resist peacefully any kind of oppression.

This was the secret of the Civil Rights movement – yes they organized, they trained, they had discipline but above all they came from love. Civil rights leader John Lewis wrote,

“among those of us who were at the heart of the movement... our sole purpose was in fact love. We would settle for the proceeds of justice and equal rights, but the force guiding our involvement was the desire to redeem the souls of our brothers and sisters who were beguiled by the illusion of superiority, so taken in and so distorted by their false god that they were willing to destroy any contradiction of that faith.”

“Our sole purpose was in fact, love.”

Paul, or whoever wrote the Letter to the Ephesians was a man, or woman, of their time. They assumed a social hierarchy which we repudiate. But within that the message is clear - in whatever situation you find yourself – choose to come from love.

When we place this idea of subjection into a spiritual context, it is all about love. The three Persons of the Trinity, Creator, Word and Holy Spirit live in mutual submission to one another. Each one is subject to each other one. We don't get to live with Jesus and copy what he does like the early disciples – we get to live with the Trinity in all its glory and as we are transformed into the likeness of Christ, so we learn that voluntary subjection is about love, about servant leadership, about the first being last and vis versa.

The word voluntary is of course, key. In Ephesians the wives and slaves were not in voluntary subjection – that was just their place in society – so they are told to transform it – to make it voluntary. It's like that bumper sticker “To do what you love – love what you do.” By voluntarily subjecting themselves as if the master or husband was Christ, by coming from love, they had the potential to transform the situation.

Not to deny or accept the oppression but to transform the whole picture by putting Christ front and center.

Which is what the letter to the Ephesians is all about; putting Christ first. In the passage we heard this morning, the writer is addressing the Gentiles and saying that they too have been brought into the fold. Even though they were once despised by the Jews now they have been brought into the Body of Christ together with Jews and the two groups are at peace.

Hmmm... I wonder whether that was true on the ground or whether it is opening up a vision of what may be.

We still have not managed a fully integrated society or a fully integrated church. As we look around the room our ethnic makeup does not match the ethnic make up of Los Osos; our economic profile does not match the economic profile of Los Osos. We have a long way to go.

But we hold the vision. We hold the vision for an inclusive church which brings together all people, yes Democrats *and* Republicans. And we hold the vision that in all our dealings with one another we may come from love, remembering that we “are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom we also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

That is our vision; that we are being built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God and a resting place for God’s people needing healing, coming from love.