

Are We Building Up?

October 30, 2011

Ephesians 5

Reformation Sunday (5th Sunday of God's Building Project)

Odds are that even if you've been reading along with the Text Message through our exploration of Ephesians, you didn't expect that Paul would turn his attention from God's glorious grace toward give detailed instructions for how husbands and wives related to each other in the household. I saw how this made a few of you squirm in your pew this morning. You might be thinking, "I've been showing up each week to hear the next compelling chapter of this letter, to hear about how I am part of God's glorious and wonderful family and this is what we get! I mean really, house rules, submitting to each other, that's it?! Surely, God has to have bigger plans than this for us!"

The thing is, all of that grand poetry about God's splendor and glory; the cosmic reality of God's eternal love for the world shapes the household rules we hear today. Now we're into the nuts and bolts of how God's relationship to the world gets played out in our relationships to each other. What we discover here is that God is building up the church through mutual relationships of love and service to one another.

You might be thinking I'm nuts at this point. "Mutual love and service? You gotta be kidding me!" I know. I heard it too. "Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord."

This little verse has the potential to push personal, emotional, and historical buttons all at once for many people. Paul sounds sexist and many have considered him an enemy of women. Some might even go as far to call him a male chauvinist pig. Let's

take a step back though, first. Today, Paul may sound sexist to our modern ears, but considering where and when this letter is being written, Paul was actually suggesting some radically progressive new things. He starts with Ephesians 5:21, “And further, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

You see, women in the Roman Empire were property to be used for the economic and social advancement of men. Their primary responsibility was to produce babies, particularly male babies. Roman society was highly structured and hierarchical. The household was the foundation of civic and economic life for Romans. There was a lot of pressure to live this way, whether you were Roman or not. This structure was the norm. The hierarchy began with husbands, then male extended family members, eldest sons, close business associates, then wives, other children, other extended family members, servants, and finally slaves. Everyone had a proper place. Rules were set. Roles were inflexible. It was safe to say that the husband ruled the roost without question. All power and authority pointed to him. In this system, the likelihood of respect, let alone mutual submission of husband and wife would be unheard of.

So when Paul makes the claim that in Christian households that men should also be subject to women - to love their wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself for her - this is totally cutting edge and a major challenge to the social system of the day. Another way to hear this verse is, “And further, build one another up out of reverence for Christ.”

Here, Paul starts to mess with the cultural norms. The church becomes the community where everyone in the household has a voice and people are

accountable to each other. No longer is the wife's role simply to be a household product to be used in her husband's home. In Christian community, she is given a voice and an identity. In a similar manner, no longer is the husband's role to treat his household as utensils to be used and manipulated. He has been given a purpose beyond himself to love his household, as Christ has loved and cared for the church. It's not about power and authority – it's about knowing others and being known by them and walking this long journey of life together. Paul listens to the Spirit as he envisions a new community being built up in these households. Social roles are reshaped to take on the image of Christ and his body.

God's work is not done with this letter to the Ephesians. God continues to call us to new understandings about what it means to be men and women both made in the image of God. God wants us to continue to figure out how men and women can make their best way in the world today.

We've come a long way from where things were at in Roman society. Yet, we haven't gotten it all right yet. We still need God to wake us from seasons of apathy and intentional ignorance. We can't be faithful and gloss over relationships that we see faltering. We can't ignore people we love who are losing their way. We all need to hear over and over the call of Ephesians 5:14. "Awake, O sleeper, rise up from the dead, and Christ will give you light."

Building one another up isn't always easy, sometimes it requires us to be raised from a life of dead living. Yet, it is the key to the joy and growth of relationships, especially marriage. When we work to build one another up we ask ourselves - How can we give our best to one another? How can we honor our differences? How can we live

complementary rather than contradictory lives? These kind of relationships requires a deep investment in the lives of others. At the same time it also demands that we open our lives up as well. We're never sure what people will find once we let someone else in and that can be scary. But you might also look at it this way; you may never know who you are really capable of becoming if you don't.

The deeper our relationships are the more likely we are to disagree and sometime even argue with the ones we love. Building each other up means people are committed to disagreeing well. Many of us have grown up with the notion that disagreements are failures. It's not true. If there is no disagreement, then the relationship is not very deep or honest. God went to a lot of trouble to make each of us unique. It includes being different from our spouses and other family members. Those differences are meant to enrich our relationships. There is an old saying that if two people agree on everything, one of them is not necessary. We need our differences in order to know who we fully are.

Yet, we live in a society that has its own values. These values often work against relationships that build up. We see people tear each other down by clinging more fiercely to ideology than interdependence. We listen to screaming heads on television and in the halls of government blame "the other side" for every ill in society. We watch as young women continue to be treated like property to be exploited in mainstream advertising and on the internet. We witness a generation of young men struggling to find their way through adolescence not knowing and sometime not motivated to discover what their future holds. I worry about the spiritual lives of young men as I have watched my male friends slip away from church over the last two decades. It makes me wonder what the church is missing when it

comes to connecting men with a meaningful spiritual life. As connected as our world seems today, one has to wonder how our relationships have become so disconnected. How has God become so distant to so many people's experience? How do we as the church shape our community so that men and women alike see a clear place to belong, and with that, embrace a call to live a life beyond themselves?

These are some of the issues facing us today. They aren't the same as Paul was dealing with in the first century of Christianity. Yet, God continues to send the Spirit to awaken us to those around us and to bring the relationships we share out into the light. We are called as God's dear children to submit ourselves to each other, and imitate God in his manner of love. We are called out of the darkness and into Christ's light, even when it is more convenient and less demanding to remain hidden. God is building up a church in and through us where Christ's light shines in the darkest of places, where the lost are to be found, where the sting of sin and death is numbed and where your families, regardless of what they look like experience the up building presence of God's life giving, life affirming Spirit. God places this responsibility in our hands and commends this work to us. Will you be part of building up this kind of church? Amen.