

# The Aftermath and The Order of Things

## *Ephesians 5:21-32; Esther 1:10-22*

We noted last week that, during the centuries between Adam and Christ, God chose otherwise ordinary and fallen men to picture in some aspect of their lives some feature of what Christ would become to people like you and me who believe in Jesus in the Last Days. So for instance, the temple builders, men like David and Solomon and Zerubbabel all resembled Christ in their zeal for the task of building a sanctuary where God could be worshiped and people could get forgiven and healed and helped on their way to heaven. So when they lived, David and Solomon and Zerubbabel were the Christs, the guys you wanted to get near, the guys you wanted to side with even though David and Solomon sometimes sinned badly and Zerubbabel was just more or less ordinary.

And one Christ-like feature that kept appearing in Old Testament stories was that of the Bridegroom in search of a Bride who would recognize and respond to his love. Samson, from the book of Judges, would be an example of this. Unable to find a Jewish bride, Samson was reduced to courting foreigners, Philistine women, remember...whose pagan backgrounds and circumstances combined to break Samson's heart and ultimately to cost him his life. My old friend from North Collins, Pastor Derek Yoder, once described Samson as a Savior without disciples, a Bridegroom without a Bride.

And last week we observed the even stranger fact that it was not just Israelites, not just men from God's people that God chose to picture who Christ would be and what Christ would do when people finally got to see Jesus face to face and trust him heart to heart. So Isaiah prophesied that Cyrus, the first Persian emperor, would become a Christ figure to God's people when he liberated them from Babylonian captivity to go home to the Promised Land and live as God's people again. Because what Cyrus did, giving people a new start and setting them on a path toward home, is Christ-like.

And last week we also saw, here in the book of Esther, Xerxes the Persian, looking something like Israel's God way back in the first three chapters of Genesis. Because both Xerxes here in Esther and God in Genesis set themselves up to be crowned as the rulers of a great domain after a seven day festival. Both of them stage the coronation in a spectacular garden loaded with plenty and beauty and precious metals enough to set the whole world agleam. And both of them summon to their garden a bride, a queen whom each one hopes to crown as his companion and co-regent over the realm.

In Genesis, the Bride was humanity, Adam and Eve both, you and I together are the bride God loves and wants to honor. In the book of Esther, the bride was a woman named Vashti, likely a princess from a wealthy and powerful family. And then, finally, most dramatically, both God back in Genesis and Xerxes here in Esther were rejected by the bride for whom each had shown so much love and made such elaborate preparations. Adam and Eve were waylaid by the Serpent

and Vashti got so caught up in a festival of her own that she left the king unsupported at precisely that moment Persia needed to know that the queen stood with and believed in her husband and sovereign.

And from there this morning's Scripture Lesson wends its way through what modern ears would hear as a quasi-comic debate about how to keep the women of the realm from getting out from under the thumbs of their chauvinistic and domineering husbands. To the modern mind, Memucan, probably Xerxes' prime minister, looks and sounds like a fool, crafting legislation to use Vashti as an example so that women remain afraid to show any sort of independence of will or conscience.

And if we stop there, we'll commit the classic American mistake of presuming that what we think and how we feel is the end all and be all by which our ancestors and our contemporaries and our descendants should be judged. Because after all, we are the smartest people who ever lived, right? Our society works better than any society that ever was, right? So I'm going to be that attorney who takes a tough client and argues that Memucan was not a fool. And the first thing that must be conceded is that women in Persia 500 years before Christ were terribly oppressed and exploited. Because, people, it was 500 years before Christ. These were societies who had next to no concept of men and women, all being created together in the image of God. Only in God's country, Israel, were women considered full-fledged human beings and even there the notion was not very well formed.

So we'll read stories as this book goes on about oppression and exploitation against women that will take our breath away if we take them seriously and we will deal with them as they come. I can't work through it all this morning. But, in Memucan's defense, I want to assert two things. First, Vashti is only banished. Because my gut tells me that, in most realms in those days, a queen who publically undermined the king on Coronation Day wouldn't have lived to see sundown. Xerxes could have killed her, most other kings would have killed her, but Vashti doesn't die. Which should remind us of God on the day of Fall.

God had warned Adam and Eve that they would die if they ate the fruit he forbade them, and they did die but not on that day. On that day, God picked them up and cleaned them up and dressed them up, and he only banished them after promising them that death would not be his final word about them. We need to remember that Eve did not get her name till after she was banished from the Garden, and Adam names Eve because he heard God promise that she would live to have a "*seed*", an offspring who would undo sin and curse and death for us all. So he named her "*Eve*" which sounds like the Hebrew for "*alive*".

So Memucan counsels Xerxes to be God-like, really Christ-like, to show mercy to his errant queen, guilty though she was. And the second thing I want to assert in Memucan's defense is that his argument that society will fall apart to the extent that women stop loving and respecting and cooperating with their husbands is absolutely true. In the Garden, in Genesis, God ordained the

union of husband and wife, father and mother as the central cog around which the rest of human society would turn.

We read in Genesis, “*So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to come upon the man and while he slept [God] took one of his ribs ...And the rib the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman because she was taken out of man.’ Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*”

This cry of Adam that the Woman was “*...bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh*” amounts to a triumphant declaration that she was like him, that women bear the image of God every bit as much as men do. And yet Adam’s naming her as he had named the other creatures also expressed that he held a degree of authority over the woman with whom he would become “*one flesh*”. Of course, in the absence of sin, one party holding authority over another equal party need not lead into rivalry and conflict the way it has between husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors since the Fall.

So the notion to take to heart here is that the first human institution God ordained to govern human relationships and human societies was marriage and family, a whole constellation of relationships founded on and defined by covenant loyalty and love. And the problem facing Memucan in Persia and the problem facing us today is that once the Fall took place, the entire dynamic between husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, neighbors and friends quickly changed. With the whole human race intoxicated with the Serpent’s doctrine, “*...you will be like God...*”, with our hearts and minds bent like that, the common affection and mutual respect and loyalty that marriage and family were supposed to teach us instead tends to drift into a ruthless struggle for control and dominance.

After the Fall, God spoke to the woman of the increased pain and danger attending childbirth, and then God said to her, “*Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.*” So this “*desire... for your husband*” God speaks of here is not a nice thing. It is not a desire to be warm and close and mutually uplifting. To the contrary, it speaks of a ruthless struggle for dominance, it is the same “*desire*”, the same word God used when he warned Cain about the jealousy that was driving him to attack and injure Abel. So since the Fall, human relationships, family relationships have been prone to become struggles for dominance. And through the centuries, men have traditionally dominated the struggle using size and strength and violence, wealth and power, authority and custom to keep women oppressed and powerless and at their mercy.

And, when circumstances have allowed, women have used what weapons they can bring to bear to ruthlessly and effectively exact revenge and exercise dominance against men in their turn, all of it ending in estrangement and heartbreak, all of it a far cry from the mutual trust and affection and respect that God meant the original marriage covenant to teach us. So it shouldn’t surprise

us then that in the New Testament, when Paul in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy and Peter in his first letter want remind us of the love and respect and cooperation God ordained for the family covenant, they both allude to domestic violence and bullying on the part of men and to the disrespect women use in turn to undermine and disempower their men when they gain the upper hand.

But honestly, in this day and age, most of us don't even notice the gospel addressing both men and women with the responsibilities God ordained for all of us together in our churches and families. In our Call to Worship this morning, Paul remembers that Christ is the original Bridegroom to whom we are all betrothed when we trust him to forgive and save and teach and help us. And the verb Paul calls us to live out toward each other and toward Christ in church, and toward husbands and fathers in family is "hypotasso" which means to "be subject". The notion here is not blind submission as it is sometimes unfortunately translated. No wife is obligated to do what he says no matter how wrong he is.

Rather the verb speaks of a recognition and respect for the office God has ordained people in our lives to have, fallen though they may be. We are to approach each other with the deference and respect that the offices we hold deserve. As Christians, we are called to "*be subject to one another out of fear for Christ*". Membership in the church is a holy office which means that God expects us to deal with each other kindly and respectfully and constructively, fallen though all of us are. To belong to Christ is to be subject to fathers and mothers at home, elders and trustees in church, teachers and police officers in society which involves deferring to what they want us to do in so far as faith and conscience will allow.

An excellent example of being subject to human authority while remaining true to faith and conscience would be the prophet Daniel who became a eunuch, a slave in the Babylonian palace serving at the mercy of a parade of half crazed oriental despots. He devoted his life to helping and serving the kings God sent him whenever possible and he fearlessly defied their commands and contradicted their madness whenever necessary. So he respected their office even while God always held first place in his heart. Well, this is a big topic which I can only begin to handle this morning.

I'd like to close with a word to the men. The women get earful from the Persian royal council in our passage this morning, but in the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's gospel Jesus addresses a similar failure of heart among men. A bunch of Pharisees, religious zealots, approached Jesus and asked him, "Can we divorce our wives for any reason we please?" And Jesus, just like Memucan and the Persians before him, remembers the original created order. "What are you talking about?" He says, "...*a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*"

They respond by citing to Jesus an escape hatch they found in the law of Moses. Moses allowed them to "...*give her a certificate of divorce and send her away.*" The certificate Moses imposed on Israelite men was actually a legal device designed to protect women from being left destitute

with no place in a traditional society. But Jesus doesn't get down in the weeds with these clowns. Their hearts were wrong, Jesus told them, "*...it was not that way in the beginning...*".

Marriage and family sometimes do go wrong and slip beyond our reach. It certainly went wrong with Xerxes and Vashti. After shocking and scandalizing the whole empire on coronation night, it was not humanly possible for Xerxes and Vashti to rebuild a workable marriage. The stage was too broad, the stakes were too high. And similar to what Moses taught, Xerxes was relatively merciful to his ex, provided her a way out that gave her a future. But the point of this passage in Esther and of our Call to Worship from Paul is that God has called us to a way of life, to a constellation of relationships which he designed to teach our hearts the sort of love and forgiveness that live in his heart. We struggle in relationships because we need a heart adjustment. It starts with us loving and trusting and being subject to the Bridegroom and Esther is going to show us how.