

Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b
Psalm 34 *R: I will bless Our God always.*
Ephesians 5:21-32
John 6:60-69

WIVES, BE WHAT????
August 27, 2006 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

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For years, I sat in the pew while today's lectionary passage from Ephesians was read and hoped some intelligent, well educated priest would preach about it. It never happened. We *have* taken some steps to alleviate the impact of this passage. We read a shortened version, that excludes the part about wives being submissive to their husbands, or we read a rephrased version that equalizes the impact, e.g. "spouses respect one another". Both of these approaches are helpful. But rarely does anyone talk about *why* it's acceptable to leave out words or change words when the words in question are called Scripture. The exception is John Shelby Spong who openly speaks of the "terrible" texts in the Bible and why we are not bound by them. Today I would like to share some basic concepts that help explain why it is *not only acceptable, but entirely appropriate*, to shorten or rewrite passages in the book we call sacred Scripture.

Humans are social animals. We are born into communities of other humans. If we don't receive recognition, love and nurturing from other humans we fail to thrive and die. Because we are social, we congregate. We make human communities.

Humans are also historical. We spend our whole lives changing. We are living organisms, never exactly the same from minute to minute. Like individual humans, human communities are historical; subject to change. So it is that we were born into a world very different from the world into which the Neanderthal humans were born. As humans interact with our environments, we continuously alter them. Change is essential to life. Contemporary philosophers observe that the only eternal reality is change itself. Is God really "unchanging" as the Greeks espoused or is God Godself in process and unfolding as process philosophers and theologians suggest?

We call the collective social experience of humans interacting with our environments "culture". Culture too is historical. As people change, culture changes. All human experience, including religious experience, happens in the context of a particular, historical culture. Culture is a basic filter through which all reality passes in any given moment of time. Religious experience – and religion – pass through the filter of culture. It is impossible to experience the sacred apart from a cultural filter.

Religion is a human phenomenon. Religion is based on the individual experience of God and the collective experience of God. Religion attempts to express, capture, preserve, cultivate and pass on the human experience of the Sacred. Because religion is a human phenomenon, it, too, is historical and mediated by a cultural filter. Unfortunately,

what often happens is that the filter [the cultural package] gets confused or overly identified with the Sacred. Religious practices, attitudes, values and laws that are culturally based become confused with religious truth. One example of the confusion of culture with authentic religious experience is “Wives be submissive to your husbands.....Husbands love your wives.”

Whenever we read “Scripture”, we need to remember this reality: *There is no human religious experience outside of culture.* All religious experience comes in a cultural package. The challenge is to distinguish authentic religious experience and meaning from the cultural package in which it is contained. A corollary is that there are many different cultural packages which might mediate authentic religious experience equally well – even simultaneously – because among humans in different geographical locations, cultures are so different.

What tools do we use to make this distinction? As Christians, we look to the historical Jesus and his words as remembered by the earliest church. We seek the basic principles of his teaching. When we do that, it becomes easier. Luke summarizes Jesus’ teaching in the sermon on the Plain with four imperatives: Love all, give all, forgive all and judge no one but yourself. When Jesus debates with the scribes in Mark, Matthew, and Luke, he states that “the whole law” is summarized in two laws: Love God with your whole heart and mind and soul. Love your neighbor as yourself. For Jesus, *all* individual laws are subject to this rule of interpretation.

Nowhere in the *teaching* of Jesus is monarchy or imperial culture upheld as necessary to Christian experience. Nowhere in the teaching of Jesus is patriarchy upheld as necessary to the experience God. Nowhere does Jesus endorse the domination of one person over another. Nowhere does Jesus say that monarchy, or the political structure of empire, is the model for his relationship to God and the church. The author of Ephesians said that; but Jesus didn’t say that.

To the extent that Jesus said anything, he said the opposite:

“You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them. Their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the servant of all.” Mark 10:42-44.

The subordination of women to the domination of men was a cultural filter in the imperialistic, Hellenistic world into which the teaching of Jesus was carried. We no longer live in such a culture. Nor must we believe that, to know and love God, we must do so in such a framework.

Jesus distinguished the authentic experience of God from the Judean culture of his time routinely. For example, Jesus challenged the rule of divorce of his time. It permitted men to divorce women but not women to divorce men. Jesus equalized the

responsibility of men and women in marriage. Jesus' teaching on divorce modified his culture by prohibiting divorce altogether and putting men and women in equal positions before the law. In his culture, women were not, and rarely could be, self-supporting and self-sustaining. They were, therefore, impoverished by divorce. This change protected the economic security of a class of otherwise helpless people in Jesus' time. Jesus was not bound by the law of his time but challenged it when it was contrary to the Spirit which gives Life.

That brings us to the gospel reading for today. Jesus tells us we are called to live by the spirit. Implicit in his statement is the assumption that we are *not* called to live only by the rules. The way of the Spirit is not the way of humans. The way of the Spirit is the way of Life. Often, it is counter-cultural.

Imagine four people from four different cultures at four different times in history looking at God through a prism.

Experiencing God is like looking through a prism. One person looks through the prism and says: "I see God. God is red! Deep, powerful, energy-filled, red! I see God and God is red." Simultaneously, another person is looking at God through the same prism, saying: "I see God. But God isn't red. God is green! Life-giving, fresh, invigorating green! I see God and God is green." Simultaneously, yet another person is looking at God through the same prism, saying: "I see God. But God isn't red. God isn't green. God is yellow! Bright, clear, hope-ful yellow! I see God, and God is yellow." Still another person is looking at God through the same prism saying: "I see God. But God isn't red or green or yellow. God is blue! Profound, serene, contemplative blue! I see God and God is blue." But God is at the other end of the prism saying, "Yes I am. Yes, I am. Yes, I am. Yes, I am."

God longs for us to be courageous enough to recognize the cultural baggage of our religion and alter it when necessary to more fully reflect who God is.