

“The Nerve to Submit”

Ephesians 5:15-30; Matthew 11:28-30

First Sunday after Pentecost, (May 27) 2018

Kyle Childress

Thirty years ago, tomorrow, Jane and I said our vows to God, to one another, and in front of a whole bunch of witnesses at the Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, KY when we were married. We made promises; we were given a new definition of who we were; we were given limits – to love this one and no other; and we promised that we would live within those limits. To use the language of the old Apostle Paul, we became subject to one another. We submitted – to God, to the promises, to one another.

And in the thirty years of submitting to one another, we have learned something of the truth and something about love. Partly, it is that it both are different and more than than we had thought (see Wendell Berry, *Standing by Words*, “Poetry and Marriage,” p. 206).

Thirty-eight years ago this coming September, on a Saturday afternoon, I drove out a country road four miles from Franklin, TX, over in Central Texas. I drove up in front of the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church and cemetery, where I was to preach the next day. Mainly I drove out there from Baylor to make sure I could find my way the next morning. But also, I drove out there because I knew that this congregation was going to look me over and hear me as a prospective new pastor for them. I wanted to get a sense of who they were and see what the place looked like.

I was disappointed. I clearly remember my heart sinking as I drove up. This was not a nice brick church, which was the church building of choice for young Baylor preacher-boys, a brick church which would say that you were a rung or two higher up on the first-church-ladder-of-success.

Well, I came back the next morning and preached. Came back and preached the next week too. The second Sunday there, they voted to call me as their new pastor (12 to 1) and I accepted. On the first Sunday in December, 1980 they laid hands on my head and ordained me as a minister of the gospel and within the next three weeks I was threatened with a 12 gauge in my face, cussed-out, told I was going to be run-off, and at the same time, I was told to hang in there; don't give up just because it gets a little rough. They said they were with me because I was their new pastor.

I did hang in there. Due to the grace of God and the loving care of some good people who put up with me and patiently taught me. I submitted to God and to them, and I submitted to my ordination vows. In the five years I was there I learned something of the truth and something about love and part of what I learned is that truth and love are both different and bigger than I had thought.

This morning's gospel lesson is one many of us have heard numerous times. These words of Jesus are both sources of great comfort and deep challenge at the same time. Jesus has been talking about John the Baptist, who is now in Herod's prison with a death sentence pronounced over him. Jesus says John was one of the greatest of prophets – "Why didn't anyone listen to him?!" And even though John

is not dead, Jesus knows that John will be executed and there's not a thing Jesus can do about it. With grief and frustration in his voice, Jesus asks out loud why don't these cities repent? Why don't people listen? Why don't they change? Good people like John die and everyone else just go on their merry way!

Then, pausing, taking a deep breath, Jesus remembers, "I know God, not everyone understands your kingdom." (If they come running like hogs to slop, then it is not the gospel.) "I thank God, there are a few who know something of what we're supposed to be about."

Jesus looks around at his few friends and disciples, sort of holds his arms out and around them, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and weighed down and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am humble and gentle in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Here again Jesus gives us that good old gospel paradox – two things, which seemed to be opposites, but when held together give us something of the truth. Here, Jesus calls us to himself to receive comfort and strength – we are weighed down. We are exhausted. If our Lord Jesus is frustrated with folk's refusal to change, then how about the rest of us tagging along behind him?! But as Jesus comforts us, he gives us a yoke to put on. He says, "The way of comfort, the way of hope and encouragement, the way to Life Abundant is to put on this yoke."

Now most of have heard this enough to know that the yoke was the heavy, wooden collar put around a pair of oxen, in order for them to pull the plow. The

yoke put them together, making them a tandem (whether they liked it or not) in order to do the heavy work. It enabled them to go on.

Somehow, in the paradox of the gospel, we find rest and comfort for our souls by taking up the yoke of Jesus. It is the submission to the yoke of Christ, where we discover something of the truth. It is in giving up our lives that we find Life and it is in dying that we are resurrected. This is the Way of Jesus; the Way of the Cross. And this is the Way to which you and I are called.

In our other lesson for today, the Apostle Paul is trying to teach the Christians in Ephesus how to be the church, the body of Christ, with one another. He is trying to show the Ephesians what the Way of the Cross looks like and how it is fleshed-out in day-to-day living together.

Paul says, “Pay attention to how you live with one another and treat one another. Don’t get drunk on chemicals; don’t be incapacitated; be alert, be ready – be filled with the Spirit of God as you sing hymns, and make melody to the Lord in your hearts. Be subject to one another. Submit to one another.

Wives submit to your husbands. Husbands love your wives just as Jesus loved the church – he died, he gave up his life, he submitted to the Way of the Cross – and so should you.

Paul tells them – tells us – to submit to one another. And one of the clearest ways we do that is by singing. We submit to the music, to the notes, to singing with one another – and when we do that – we discover a little bit of what the

gospel is about, because in submitting to one another and to the notes when we sing, we are able to make music that praises God in a way that we couldn't if everyone was singing on their own. We do not sing whatever notes we feel like singing. And we don't sing whatever words we want to sing or sing our own individual songs while others sing their individual songs. We submit. And in submitting, we are given the grace of being encouraged and encouraging one another while we praise God.

Do you see what Paul is saying? Do you see that there is more going on here when we sing, than whether we like the hymns or not?

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams says, "A musical event is – whether we know it or not – a moral event." We give up ourselves "and allow ourselves to be changed and enlarged... [these] are among our most potent ways of learning what it is to live with and before God, learning a service that is perfect freedom" (in David Ford's *Self and Salvation*, p. 123).

Rowan Williams is reminding us that how we sing and how we live with one another and the uses of power and domination and control and autonomy are all linked. Rowan Williams is telling us that there is a connection between wanting our own way in church, in our families, in our marriages, in where we live – and wanting our own way in the world, in Washington, in Austin. We want to build our wall to keep people we don't like out. We want our tax breaks, our own health care, but we don't care about anyone else. We want to carry our own guns and we want a military to do our bidding while the notion of thinking of others has become anathema. Jesus and Paul call us to another Way; the Way of the Cross in which

we subject ourselves to Christ and to one another in singing gratitude to God, where we “join together” (“harmonizes” is what this means) in community. Singing hymns together, submitting to God and to one another forms us in the habits of obedience.

One of my heroes, the ornery old baptist prophet, Carlyle Marney, is the one who asked if we have “the nerve to submit?” One reason we lose our nerve to submit is that we might lose control. But remember, we’re not to be in control in the first place – that’s God’s job. Second, the truth is, we’re not all that much in control anyway, and it is time we faced up to it. It is the grace of God when we do.

Worse, some of us don’t have the nerve to submit because we’re afraid we’ll lose our lives! We’ll lose our identity, we’ll lose our job, our income, and whatever makes us tick. Of course, this is the gospel – in baptism we give up our lives, give up our control, give up our management position in the world, and submit to Christ. The rest of our living is learning how to live up to our baptism.

New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl says that we live on 5 percent of our biblical resources – just a bit beyond the Golden Rule. But the Lord Christ calls us to put everything down on the table; lay it all down – and in so doing we will discover the Abundant Life.

I knew a fellow in Atlanta, GA, who had been a Southern Baptist pastor in the deep South in the sixties. After a lot of struggle and anguish, he submitted to Christ and took the yoke; from his pulpit he denounced the all-white membership policy of his church and denounced the racial privilege of his own kind. At the end

of the service, not one person shook his hand or looked him in the eye as they walked past him out the front door of the church. And before the week was out, he was relieved of his duties as pastor. But he told me that on that day he found Life!

I went to seminary with a middle-aged woman, who after years of looking the other way – submitted to Christ and responded to Christ’s call to preach. Her family thought she was crazy and so did some of her life-long friends in church, but she said “I have found the Life Christ talks about.”

Part of our reluctance to submit is that we have seen it abused so often. And let me be clear, there are some things we should not submit to – abuse, violence, the different ways people are beaten down, diminished, dehumanized, and broken. To those things and more like them, we say a loud and clear, “No!”

But today, that is not what we’re talking about. Today, we’re talking about submitting not to everything – we’re talking about submitting to the yoke of Christ Jesus. Paul says that part of how we learn how to submit to Jesus Christ is that we learn to submit, defer to, give ourselves over to – one another here in the body of Christ. In submitting to Christ we discover what Life is really all about.

The character Ian, in Anne Tyler’s 1991 novel, *Saint Maybe*, is starting college and all that goes with the exciting beginnings of a young person’s new life, when because of various circumstances surrounding his brother’s and his sister-in-law’s tragic automobile accident death, Ian feels called to take-over parenting their toddler daughter, his niece. He is wrestling with what to do at the reception after the funeral. He sees the little girl across the crowded room. She spots him and

crawls expertly between the legs of all the adults until she gets to Ian, then she pulls herself up by his pants leg and looks up at him. Ian reaches down and picks her up. Anne Tyler writes that suddenly the air in the room “seemed dull and brownish ... This child was far too heavy” (p. 104).

But Ian does take the child and raises her. He quits college and gets a job, much to most everyone’s dismay. He eventually finds and becomes part of a small church, The Church of the Second Chance, which gives him and the baby support. And he learns and grows as a parent, the baby grows into childhood, adolescence, and eventually she becomes an adult, gets married, and has a child herself. Toward the end of the book, Ian goes into the bedroom, where the newborn baby is asleep in a cradle. Tyler writes, “He knelt beside the cradle and turned the baby over, at the same time gingerly scooping it up so that he held a warm, wrinkled bundle against his chest as he rose. This didn’t feel like any eight pounds. It felt like nothing, like thistledown – a burden so light it seemed almost buoyant...” (p. 337).

Ian had submitted to the burdensome calling of raising a baby. But over time he grew and was transformed, with the help of a community of faith, so that eventually the burden became light.

Do we have the nerve to submit?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.