

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in the Spirit of God: Radically Reoriented Relationships”
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July 23, 2017

Ephesians 5:21-6:9

It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. It was a tale of two companies. I will begin with company number one. I learned about this company from a member of our church who spoke of his father’s experience. He was a tool grinder for one of the major auto companies. He worked on the shop floor with hundreds of others. They were not allowed to look up from their bench. They were not allowed to speak with the people next to them. They were given only a few, very short breaks to go to the bathroom. If they violated any of these rules they were written up and if they had too many infractions, they were fired. These rules were enforced by men living in glass boxes high above the shop floor. Company number two is a more modern company that I read about on-line. It was one run by a man who was extremely grateful for his success in life. He had worked his way up from the bottom and built an incredibly successful company, not on his own, but with a dedicated cadre of workers. He was regularly pondering how he could show that appreciation beyond good wages and benefits. Then one day it came to him. He would pay the college tuition of the children of his full-time workers. That’s right, he would pay their college tuition. Needless to say, his employees were thrilled.

I want to take a poll then about which of these two companies you would rather work for. So how many would prefer to work for company one, better or worse company? Ok, so now how many of you would prefer to work for company number two, better or worse company? Just as I thought, by an overwhelming margin we would want to work for the better company, number two. Now a second poll. How many of you believe that Jesus would prefer company number two over company number one? Right, and I would guess that we do because we believe that Jesus came to reorient the world to be a better world, rather than a worse world; to reorient the world into being a place where all human beings are valued and appreciated. But what that does this morning is put us in a bit of a quandary; a quandary that I know exists because every time I have ever taught this part of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, people have wondered why Paul seems to be making a worse world acceptable. By that I mean he appears to be approving of patriarchy, parental domination and slavery. In other words, he appears to be accepting of Roman cultural norms that demean and diminish others. So the question is, does God really want better world? The answer is, God absolutely does, and we can see why as we take a quick look at each of Paul’s relational categories.

We begin with husbands and wives. From our 21st century perspective the opening words cause us to tune out; wives, be subject to your husbands. All we can hear is men dominating women...a dominance which we see in our world extending far beyond the home. What we need to do however is keep on reading. We need to move to “husbands love your wives.” This one statement is a radical reorientation of the marriage relationship. In the Roman Empire, women were little more than servants, sold, or given to their husbands in arranged marriages. What Paul is insisting on here is that husbands give themselves sacrificially to their wives. That husbands see their wives as worthy of being served. That husbands see their wives as their equal because they are of one flesh. Husbands and wives, or as in

our case, spouses are to serve one another equally because this is what Jesus did. This is part of the better world.

Next, we turn to parents and children. In the Roman Empire parents had absolute power over their children, including the power of life and death. So when Paul tells children to obey their parents, he is offering nothing new. He is simply repeating the cultural norm. But when he tells parents, fathers in this case, that they are not to provoke their children to anger, but teach them about Christ, he is calling for a radical realignment of the parent-child relationship. While the parent is not to submit, himself or herself, to the child, the parent takes on the role of loving teacher and not of domineering tyrant; of wisdom giver and not of pain-bringer. Here the mutual servant relationship is that children obey and parents teach and guide. This is part of the better world.

Finally, we have the relationship between servants and masters. At this moment, I want to offer a quick aside. People often ask me why Paul doesn't just come right out and say that slavery is wrong. There are two reasons I will offer. First I am not sure that Paul could imagine a world in which there was no slavery. It was as much a part of his world as the air he breathed and the water he drank. Second, if he had urged the end of slavery he would have been immediately placed on a cross as would have every other Christian, because the one thing Rome feared more than anything else, was a slave uprising.

With that having been said, we return to the letter. Paul begins with his words to the slaves. They are to serve their masters as if they are serving Christ, not because their masters are Christ, but because God desires that they demonstrate submission and obedience, which I know galls us deep inside. What Paul says next though is what ought to catch our attention and stop us in our tracks. He tells the masters that they are not to threaten their slaves, which implies treat them poorly, but to understand that they serve God as equals. Let that sink in. This is a radical realignment of the relationship between slave and master, that the master is to see the slave as his equal and treat him as such. They are to be, to go back to verse 21, subject to one another. This is part of the better world.

It would be easy for us to pause and say, "Great, I do those things at my house. I love and respect my spouse. I care for and teach my children. I don't have any slaves, so I can let that one pass." And knowing you all as well as I do, I would agree. I believe that we do a decent job of living into these radically reoriented relationships. Which means I suppose that we could all go to lunch feeling pretty good. Yet, you all know that that is not the way this church thing works. I say that because Paul offers these radically reorganized relationships as examples of what builds the better world. They are not an exhaustive list. They are intended to help us see where we are to be headed as a community and as a world. As McLaren, author of our book, *We Make the Road by Walking*, points out, these are but three of the multiple relationship circles in our lives; marriage, family and employment. He then reminds us, and I believe so well, that there is one other circle that we cannot ignore.

This "...circle includes our critics, opponents, and enemies – the people who annoy us and those we annoy, the people who don't understand us and those we don't understand, the people who try our patience and those whose patience we try. Rather than write them off as unimportant and unwanted, we need to rediscover them as some of the most important people we know. If we ignore them, our growth in

the Spirit will be stunted. If we let the Spirit guide us in what we say to their faces and behind their backs, we will become more Christ-like” (McLaren pg. 237). In other words, our work of developing radically reoriented relationships needs to keep moving out; moving out beyond what is comfortable and beyond what is customarily expected. We are to do so because radically reoriented relationships are what will change the world. They are what will give the world hope and a future. I say this because without radically reoriented relationships, we will never hear each other, serve each other, or love each other. We will become more and more divided as families, communities, nations and peoples. Only when we submit to one another as an act of Christ-like community will we be able to step beyond what is and step into what God has planned for us.

This morning then my challenge to you is this, to choose one of the above categories from the last circle, choose someone you know in that circle and work at radically reorienting your relationship with them...thereby helping to make this a better world.