

## **“Secret Agents of God’s Commonwealth”**

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First Congregational UCC, Gaylord, MI

Texts: Hebrews 13: 1-8 and Ephesians 5:21 -6:4

I know. I know. I know you don’t like this scripture (the Ephesians one).

Most people of our time do not, especially women.

“Wives be subject to your husbands” is about all that people know of this scripture. There’s more here, but it has led many modern people to label the Apostle Paul as chauvinistic, even woman-hating. There are a couple of other scriptures that could lead one to this same conclusion. And men haven’t helped. We often used this scripture to keep women from leadership roles in the church and to keep dominance of the male in the home. Thankfully, many men are waking up to the idea that not only is that a misreading of this scripture (not to mention only reading part of it), but also that it is contrary to partnership between men and women. In fact, the idea of Paul being chauvinistic or anti-woman does not consider the actions of the man, who was among the first to partner with women in the sharing of the Gospel. Many places Paul mentions them by name as partners in his mission.

Are there places that Paul appears to have an issue with women? No doubt. But if you watch how he conducted ministry, and the place of women in the early Pauline church, I think you must at least consider that Paul was ahead of his time when it came to the role of leadership by women.

We often forget that Paul's time and place in history were vastly different from our own. It takes a study of history to see that in Paul's day women were often thought of as property, they could be dismissed by a man for anything, and had almost no rights to property of any kind. If widowed, they often were left destitute and ignored by most of society. Leadership? Almost never.

There is also trouble with Paul talking about children and slavery in this passage. Again, not to excuse, but to explain, that was his historical location. Children were not treated the way they are today. They were often working at a very young age, seen as a burden, or ignored. Slaves were held in those days, and while slavery is wrong it was reality. That doesn't make this scripture much easier to understand or to apply to our lives, but nonetheless it is in the Bible and it our responsibility to deal with the scriptures we don't like as well as the ones we do. Is there anything being said here that applies to our time in history? I think there is, in the very first sentence of our scripture for today, one that is often ignored as

we jump to our outrage over the words that follow. Here is the first line: Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

The scripture is not “be subject to those in power” it is to be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Eugene Peterson in his modern translation of this text, found in *The Message* “Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another.” It seems that in our society we might consider being courteous and reverent toward one another. I think you will agree that much of our society today is neither courteous nor reverent toward others, especially with those with whom we disagree. It seems that we disagree about something with just about everyone. Division, strife, anger, hate speech, violence and other such actions are the rule of the day. What we need is something different than the cultural norm and that is what the Apostle Paul calls for in every generation.

In the words of Father Richard Rohr, “Paul believes the Church is meant to be a community whose way of living runs contrary to the prevailing culture” (Fr. Richard Rohr, *Paul: A New Creation, Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation, July 8, 2021*).

In other words, we need some secret agents...agents whose job it is to subvert and change the culture. If you get caught, you might be unpopular as it is much more the rage to look for retribution against others, but reconciliation,

blessing, courteous reverence? That is crazy talk in any generation, but perhaps especially in this one.

. I love what Brian McLaren has done with this scripture in our chapter for this week in the book *We Make the Road by Walking*. He tells us that “Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to conspire with the Spirit to bring blessing to others.” He then starts with the family, saying that “nobody is better positioned to wound and harm your spouse than you, and nobody better to love and enhance your spouse’s thriving than you.” This is true if you are a man or a woman and regardless of if whether your spouse is of the same or a different gender. The same adage about “no one better positioned” goes for your parents, your children, your siblings...those who are closest to you. “The Spirit wants to conspire with you in making their lives rich, full, free good, and fruitful.”

Now that seems to be something we can get behind, doesn’t it? It’s not about you having the power over somebody or giving your power away to another. But it does require that you use the power you do have to make a difference within the circles you travel. You can choose whether you want to treat people with reverence, or to stomp them underfoot. And I’m afraid, much of our culture is making the wrong choice. Left, right and center, it’s become all



the rage not only to win an argument against an opponent, but to take them out. And often, we do it in Jesus' name. This makes no sense to me whatsoever, and yet I witness it so often it can bring me to tears.

If Richard Rohr is right that through the Church, God calls us to a new way of living, and that living is counter cultural. "It is a way of cooperating rather than competing, a way of giving rather than getting, a way of sharing rather than hoarding, a way of sacrifice rather than comfort, a way of faith rather than knowledge, a way of relationship rather than anonymity, a way of love rather than animosity." Brian McLaren, referring to Paul, says, "Although his writings may strike us as chauvinistic by today's standards, they were progressive by the standards of his time, because they promoted mutual responsibility, not merely top-down privilege."

The bottom line? "The Spirit is looking for conspirators who are interested in plotting goodness in their communities." Let's ask ourselves, "What would our community look like if God's dreams were coming true?" The answer gives us a vision to work toward. I'm afraid that in most places this question isn't even asked...not even by Christians! Instead, God is the great gift-giver in the sky who

rewards people with good things who say the right religious words. That image of God could not be further from the truth.

Brian McLaren talks about ever-expanding circles of this care and reverence, from our intimate relationships to our church, to our community, and inevitably to the whole world. He even instructs us to look at the words we use, stating, "Words can wound, sometimes deeply: careless words, critical words, condemning words, harsh words, insulting words, dehumanizing words, words of gossip or deception. If your life were a ship, your words would be its rudder." In all the circles we are invited to be a part of the Spirit conspiracy that is spreading quietly across our world. "Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to be a secret agent of God's commonwealth, conspiring with others behind the scenes to plot goodness and foment kindness wherever you may be."

Could that be something the church could do? Could we model being subject to one another out of reverence for Christ? Can we have mutual care, and life-enhancing companionship? Or do we somehow require someone to be in charge both to tell us what to do and so that we can refuse to do it and criticize the leader? Are we just a bunch of individuals running around getting our needs and wants met, or is there something more, something that resembles

community that we desire? What kind of community do we desire? What are we willing to do to create such a community? We need some secret agents who will represent the love of God and the values of God's commonwealth. Will you join?

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.

