

“I’d Like to Teach the World...to Sing”

I Peter 3:1-7/Genesis 2:18-25

1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

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By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Text

Read I Peter 3:1-7.

II. Introduction

So last Sunday the text was about Christian faith and slavery with the verse, “Slaves, accept the authority of your masters” (I Peter 2:18). That was tough and took some work to interpret. And today the text is about Christian faith and marriage with the verse, “Wives, accept the authority of your husbands” (I Peter 3:1). Hmm? So, I can tell you I’m a little afraid to look ahead at the text for next Sunday.

But first, before we try to figure out what’s going on with the text on marriage and husbands and wives, there’s a story. The story comes from Fuller Theological Seminary president Mark Labberton’s book, *The Dangerous Act of Worship*. Mark writes this:

“One day a man came into my office looking for help in making sense of the nightly conversations about Christianity he was having with his newly converted wife. He made it clear to me that he was very busy, very successful, and didn’t really have much time for this. What he wanted were a few quick bulletin points about Christian faith. And he had about 5 minutes right now, please.

“It would have been easy for me to hand him some books or pamphlets on Christian faith. And while those can be good, I didn’t do that. Instead I said, ‘I can see you are a busy and successful person. So I don’t think what you’re asking for is a good idea.’ Stunned, he asked why. ‘Because,’ I explained, ‘if I were to give you some bullet points about Christian faith, and if you were to really understand them, they would have such a significant way of working in your life that it would really mess things up. You would have to rethink the meaning of success, of time, of family, of everything, really. That’s a lot. And I really don’t think you want to do that, do you?’

“No,’ he said.

“Exactly,’ I replied.

“Well, at least I don’t think so,’ he stammered. ‘Maybe that’s what we need to talk about first.’ So I invited him to sit down.” (p. 64)

III. Brief Exegesis

A wife has become a Christian. Her husband is not. But he sees something different in her. And he's not sure what it is, but he wonders. That's what's going on in Mark Labberton's story.

And that's what's going on in the text from I Peter. A woman has converted from her pagan faith to Christianity. Her husband has not. So does she stay in the marriage? And how does she live her new faith so that her husband might start to wonder?

You see, this text in I Peter is NOT some type of premarital discussion point for a couple getting married. It is NOT some type of biblical mandate for roles in marriage. And it most certainly is NOT some type of text to be preached at a wedding. And though this text is often misused that way, it is not any of that.

If we really want to talk about marriage and husband and wife roles, the best place is Genesis 2. It's the second creation story. And in that story the woman ("ishah" in Hebrew) is created from the rib of the man ("ish" in Hebrew.) "ishah" from "ish." don't you love the poetry in Hebrew? The woman is created from the man, and therefore different from all the other creation. There is a connection, heart to heart, soul to soul. They are together, side by side. And the woman is called a "helper who is appropriate for the man." The Hebrew means partner; different but equal. It's like two puzzle pieces. One is not better than the other. Both are important, and they support each other, fit together, make a whole. That's the biblical model from the beginning. Those are the roles that are to be worked out. And somehow in our insecurities and immaturities we often make a mess of that.

Genesis 2 is a good text to talk about husband and wife roles in a marriage. But not I Peter 3. I Peter 3 is about living the Christian faith in a marriage. It is about evangelism. It's about being a witness. It's about living the new-found Christian faith in the context of marriage when a spouse is not a Christian. It's Mark Labberton's story.

So what about I Peter 3? Well, first a little context. The recipients of this letter we call I Peter lived in Asia Minor. Today we call it Turkey. They were part of the Roman Empire that was predominately Greek in culture. That meant politics were Roman and the ways of life were shaped by Greek philosophy. People were religious and participated in the religions of various pagan temples. Greek language was spoken and Greek philosophy discussed. The Greek culture valued peace and sought that by blending varying traditions and cultures and religions.

And so converting to Christianity made you a bit of an oddity. You didn't believe in various gods, you believed in one God. And you believed that one God was made known in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So you didn't attend other temples, rather you only attended your church. And there were many pagan religious festivals connected to the temples. But you as a Christian didn't attend those, because you didn't believe in that god, and some actions were outside your Christian moral code. And while the Greek culture sought peace and well-being here and now for everyone, Christians had an eye toward the future and heaven. They

sought to also live in peace. But they believed “this world is not my home.” They looked for the return of Christ and the coming of God’s kingdom in its fullness.

So all of this set Christians apart. They were a visible minority. And as often happens, minorities who are different are subject to abuse and persecution. It wasn’t the Roman-driven governmental persecution with arrests and martyrdom that would come. This was rather local harassment, bullying, injustice, loss of jobs, snide comments, picking on your kids, and arbitrary unfairness. And good luck if you end up in court, as rarely were rulings made in your favor. That’s the situation for this letter.

So when a wife converts to Christianity, and her husband is not a Christian, what does she do? That is the question driving this text. Out of all the options, the word here is to “settle into the marriage,” be committed, be faithful, don’t let your faith cause you to separate from your husband. At that time in that culture husbands had a more authoritative role. So the word here is up to a point, don’t fight that. Rather, let the virtues of the Christian faith bear witness to your husband. Let your modesty, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and intelligence show the truth of Christian faith. Christianity was thought to disrupt the peace and break up families and relationships. Wives are to show that isn’t true.

And then there is the word to the husbands. It’s not clear if the husbands are married to Christian or non-Christian wives. But regardless, like the word to the wives, husbands are to settle into the relationship. Christian faith should not be a cause of separation. Rather husbands are to care for their wives, practice gentleness and kindness, and be faithful. Christian faith should make them better husbands, not worse. And in that consideration of their wives, husbands bear witness to the Christian faith in that marriage relationship. And if that wife is a non-Christian, she may also convert and discover the new life of the Christian faith.

That’s what this misunderstood text is about. It’s not about God-ordained roles in a marriage. That discussion begins in Genesis 2. Rather this text is about Christian faith in a 1st C marriage, especially when the wife or husband is a Christian and the other is not. And that’s even more important when Christian faith was believed to be a disruption of peace and family relationships.

IV. Brief Theological Reflection

So what’s the word of God here for us? This is not 1st C Asia Minor. I think to wives and husbands the Word is to be the best wife or husband that you can. Christian faith is about kindness and patience and peace and truth and generosity and goodness and faithfulness. Bring that to the marriage. And perhaps if you are married to someone who is not a Christian, the way of your life in your marriage will invite him or her to wonder about the Christian faith, seek some “bulletin points” like that story at the beginning of the sermon, and come to be a Christian.

But beyond that I think this text is also about how Christians are in other relationships and places and situations that are not Christian (which increasingly is the way of life around us). Rather than separate off from people and situations different than us, we can settle into those

relationships and places with kindness, honesty, truth, and peace. We can seek to make a difference one person and one choice and one place at a time.

Now in truth as we live the Christian faith, a type of separation can sometimes happen. It happens when we are pressured to act in a way that is not Christian. Pressured to lie, we do not. Tempted to pass on gossip, we do not. When others say justice doesn't matter, we say yes it does. When others say greed isn't a problem, we say yes it is. And when many fear those who are different due to culture, race, language, or religion, we say not me, because we are all children of God. Those and many other moral issues may separate us from people and places, but in that we still bear witness to the truth and life of God and God's kingdom. And who knows how that witness might bear fruit.

In the mystery and imagination of pondering this text I was reminded of a commercial that first aired in 1971. Yes, it sought to sell a product. But in all the turmoil and anger and violence and change in the 60s and early 70s, it sought to bear witness to a different way of life. It bore witness to acceptance, diversity, peace, and harmony. Not separation from the culture, but transformation of the culture. And because of that, it became a type of vision for many people. Here is the commercial: (plays "I'd Like to Teach the World...to Sing").

Peace and harmony; it is a simple, profound, and challenging song and vision. Not separation from the world. But transformation, led by those with courage and faith and a great hope.

And it is a song we sing. Not selling Coke (although Coke is fine, especially with a scoop or two of ice cream). But instead we sing bearing witness to Christian faith, peace, and harmony that can transform life. Amen.