

PENTECOST XIX – 2020

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Amen.

I was a language major in school many years ago, and I still have a great fascination with words. Having studied some Latin and Greek, as well as some of the more modern languages, when I read a sentence or a phrase, I often look for the root of a particular word to understand it better, and the word that popped out at me this week is the word “subject.” It can be either a noun or a verb, with a difference in pronunciation. “SUB-ject” is the noun, and a subject is someone who is beholden to a ruler, a king, a czar, a dictator. It is not usually a word we use to refer to those who live in a democracy. “Sub-JECT” is the verb, and it generally means to place someone or some people under an authority. We use it in other ways, like “subject to the laws of nature”—meaning that nature itself is an authority. I want to stay with the way we use it in referring to people within a society.

The root of that word “subject” is the Latin verb “to throw” or “to place” or “to array,” with the prefix “under.” We’ve heard the literal meaning of that word many times in the past few years when reporters and pundits claim that some politician or someone’s boss is putting the blame on a staff person. We call that “throwing him or her under the bus.” That’s probably the most negative connotation we have, for it declares that one human being is disposable according to the will of another. It rather implies that the politician or boss sees himself or herself as like unto God, a ruler without any restraints—although I could argue elsewhere that God has chosen some self-restraints, much more so than an autocrat does.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews is referring to authority, but without putting any negative judgments on it. He describes Jesus as having been—for a little while—lower than the angels but is now crowned with glory and honor. The author also muses on our place in the universe: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor, subjecting all things under their feet.” The author describes us in the same words he uses for Jesus. What a powerful image of humanity! What a striking image of our authority! And yet this is not new with him, for we read in Genesis 1 the words of God to Adam: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” HAVE DOMINION OVER EVERYTHING! I will come back to the word “subject,” but let me say a few words about “dominion.” To have dominion is “to be like God to someone or something,” or to treat someone as God might treat her or him, and that can mean only one thing: to love the other with all one’s heart, to love the person as God would and actually does love that person or that dimension of reality. In the Genesis story, this means to love all of creation as much as God does. That is the real basis for our relationship with the earth, and if we commit ourselves to God’s intentions beyond the selfishness of our everyday needs, we shall treat “this fragile earth, our island home” with much more care and carefulness than we have been.

Let’s go back to the subject, which is “subject.” Both passages today, from Genesis and from Mark’s gospel, are concerned about the intimate relationship between two people. Given the times in which both were written, they are talking about the relationship between a man and a woman. In human history, this relationship—for thousands

of years—has depended on the ways society has seen the value and capacities of each, of a man and of a woman. We all know the way our forebears looked at each: the man was seen as the leader, ruler, boss, the one who had authority—the one with skills and abilities and brains. The woman was seen as the one who had to obey, the one with limited faculties and capacities. I can see no other basis for that line of thinking than an emphasis on physical strength and prowess—who could kill a lion! The man might be able to; the woman certainly could not. That thinking was enshrined in Jewish law as well as in other countries and cultures with this point of view.

In Jesus' day, a man could divorce his wife just by saying "I divorce you" three times in public. The woman did not have that option, that right. Society set up the expectation that only men could bear the authority within a marriage, within a household, within society itself, and in the Church that pattern and expectation remained the same until the adoption of our current Book of Common Prayer (in the mid-1970s), when the word "obey" was removed from the woman's vows.

Strangely, when I was working with a couple to plan their wedding forty years later or a half dozen years ago, they were shocked to see that the word "obey" was no longer there. In the vows we make to one another today, we each promise the same thing.

The gospel passage is about marriage and divorce. Jesus doesn't say much about divorce, except to say that God allowed it because of our human hardness of heart, our unwillingness or inability to go on loving someone even when it becomes difficult. The essence of marriage, as Jesus sees it, is that when we are proclaiming our love publicly, when we are deeply, fully committing ourselves to another person—not in a wedding, but in "holy matrimony"—we are saying that we want to want to keep loving the other in this way for ever. We want to love the other now, yes, AND we want to want to love again and again and

again. We are not always able to do that, and especially since, with modern medicine and disciplines of health and wellness, we live so much longer than our ancestors did, and we humans, each and every one of us, change so very much over time.

In the mid-1960s, The Episcopal Church wrestled with divorce, recognizing that many of our people were getting divorces as were people in other denominations. Up until then, we did not permit remarriage, and if someone did marry again, in another denomination or under civil law, they were literally excommunicated, forbidden to receive the sacrament. This seemed wrong to just about everyone, so at a General Convention of the Church, an equal number of “high church” and “low church” theologians were literally locked in a room, probably smoke-filled, and told they could not come out again until they found a way forward to get us beyond this perplexing matter. They wrestled with it and came up with a new understanding of what can happen in relationships, declaring that a marriage relationship can become “spiritually dead,” having no life left within it. They observed that when that happened, it was likely that the couple would turn on each other and, instead of being loving and caring, would snipe at each other and tear each other down mentally and spiritually, causing more harm than good. In such case, they argued, it was better for them to go their separate ways so that they could heal from the wounds of this relationship. Since many of these theologians were also parish clergy, i.e., pastors, they noted that when someone was healed from such wounds, they had the capacity to fall in love again and make a new commitment to another person, again wanting to want to love that person for as long as time itself. Under those circumstances, a person may be given permission to remarry.

Let's note something here: one of the impediments to marriage is being bound up in a past relationship which makes any new commitment

impossible or unlikely. In the marriage service, we ask the two people, “will you have this man to be your husband,” and “will you have this woman to be your wife?” What we are asking is this: is there enough room in your heart for a new person to live there? You can see that for 20-somethings we are asking “have you got over yourself enough yet to allow someone else to make demands on your time, your energy, your thoughts, your affections? Or are you still stuck on yourself as we usually are when we are teen-agers and young adults? For someone who has been married before, having lost a partner in death or having been divorced, we are trying to discern if they are still so much in love with the past spouse that they do not really have the capacity to love another, or if they are still so caught in their anger and woundedness from that relationship that there is no capacity to love another person. [That is, essentially, what we are asking in our review of Edgar and Erin’s ministries here: have you, as a congregation, let go of the past?] In the marriage service we are asking, is there enough room in your heart to make space for another? It is up to the parish priest to ask such questions and to make a discernment and then write to the bishop to ask permission to officiate at the marriage. The bishop’s role is essentially to see that the parish priest has been so fully present to this couple to be able to make the discernment that this marriage has a very strong possibility of being a good and lasting one.

The first part of the marriage office is about receiving someone into our hearts. The second part is about what we are willing to give of ourselves to another. The circumstances are stated in just about every Christian service of Holy Matrimony, some way of saying, “for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, with the commitment “to love and to cherish until we are parted by death.” The promise that we make, that is, what we give, is probably the most profound commitment one can make in this life: “with all that I am, and

all that I have, I honor you....” And as with every great promise we make in the Church, we claim spiritual help: “in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

A few final words about this term, this idea of “subject:” In diagramming sentences while in school, we learned that there is a subject, an actor, and there is also an “object,” a person or thing that is acted upon. It is very clear that the SUBJECT is dominant and the OBJECT lesser. The great difficulty in relationships of any kind, whether social or personal, is when we treat them as subject/object, when they become “I to it,” not a person but a thing. What the marriage office shows us, what God’s view of marriage is, as revealed to us in scripture, is that a healthy and life-giving relationship is always SUBJECT to SUBJECT, more specifically, I to I, Self to Self, recognizing and affirming that we can only truly be one when each of us is fully present and seeing the other as an equal. *Amen.*

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