

I remember a few years ago being a on a whitewater rafting trip down on the New River in West Virginia. We had been rafting all morning and had pulled off on the bank to set up for lunch. The guides and staff quickly set up some tables and put out all kinds of bread, lunchmeat, cheese and other food. As I was making my way to the tables, the lead guide shouted out over everyone “To show you that chivalry is still alive and well in the great state of West Virginia, it’s ladies first gentlemen.” As all of the women made their way to the table I was thinking ‘you know it’s actually nice to be somewhere other than a religious setting where men still know to show women proper respect.’ As I was thinking that, the women had all made it up around the tables and just then the guide shouted out over everyone again, “OK ladies now get to making sandwiches for the men.” ☺

The continual war of the sexes...

The theme for tonight’s dinner is *The Family Circle* and what I originally thought I would be talking about kind of changed over the last few months. The family is such a large topic but as I began to pray more about it, it became clear that I needed to focus on the most essential link. We know family is the basis of society, but marriage is the basis of the family. What man will be for woman and woman will be for man is most important. What husband is for wife and wife for husband.

We used to joke about the genders like that river guide but over the last few months and year or so, it has lost its playful tenor. We hear phrases like “war on women” and see “Women’s marches” popping up around the nation.

- the family circle is being made into a sparring ring - and what is the great debate over? The good of the family? What will be best for the family? No, it is over POWER – who has power – who doesn’t and how to get more power.

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If we are to strengthen the Family Circle it must begin here.

If we are to move it from being a battle ground to a foundation stone, we must go to the where the attack is being made and discover the deeper Truth.

What does it mean to be male and female – or more specifically in a family, what does it mean to be husband and wife. So the format of this talk is that we will first see what does the Word

of God say about family – husband and wife? Then we'll look at the challenges to both the men and the women. Next we'll look at what is the Christian Vision of the Family Circle. In God's eye, what does a Christian marriage look like. Finally we will look at how we find healing and hope in our own lives in this area.

There are many Scripture passages we could look at to direct this talk, but in the interest of time I am going to go nuclear and take the most controversial and one that will make us all the most uncomfortable...because it is a good sign there is some deep truth here. Wherever satan attacks, he has a reason, because he knows the strength and the goodness of that which he is attacking.

In John, Chapter 6, our Lord gives his disciples the doctrine of the Eucharist: "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you will have no life within you." And we're told the disciples said "This is a hard saying, who can accept it?" – often the hardest sayings are in the most important areas.

And the hard saying in this area:

Ephesians 5:22-23

"Women be subordinate to your husbands. Christ is the head of the Church so the husband is the head of the wife. Men spend yourself for your wife the way Christ did for the Church."

This *is* a hard teaching. For both. For wife and for husband. For women and for men.

First and most obvious to us, it is a hard saying for women: ---- well don't we all recoil at the idea of being subordinate to anyone. In our culture subordination means weakness, it means someone not strong enough to go it on their own, to be their own person. We recoil maybe at the memory of a bad father or bad husband, or a mean boss that we had to be subordinate to, we recoil at the memories and feelings of weakness and helplessness. This saying grates our ears.

But what do the temptations look like for wives to resist this hard saying, to resist respecting her husband and his authority in the family? It is the temptation of the wife and mother to grumble and to point out the faults and failings of her husband to her children or to others. It's the temptation to keep secrets from her husband, to allow these little divisions into the marriage bond, things that seem so small and yet create real divisions. It is the temptation to not be patient with one's husband. To remind him of everything he is not. To nag him to become holier, a better provider, more sensitive, to constantly tell him what he is not doing right. These are all temptations to resist this hard saying today.

But what about the men? We might be sitting there saying "What is a hard saying for men in this?" Isn't this turning into a chauvinist talk?

Let's look at it from the other end. What does this Scripture passage mean when it speaks of your authority husbands? I mean this is a pretty serious stuff- this authority. The Church is called to be faithfully obedient to the authority of Christ, to listen for His Word, to take our cues from Him, to model ourselves after Him. And Christ is saying **This is your authority in your family.** That Man Is You in your family! Which then begs the questions: What is your life communicating to your family? What are the cues they are taking from you? What are the words you are feeding them with? Are they words that build up or tear down? What decisions are you making that are impacting them? This isn't Jesus asking you if you want the authority and responsibility. You have it. You have received this office and you cannot get out from under it. You can't take your husband or father hat off and go back to simply being an adolescent -concerned about making your life just the way you want it. A father and husband is called to love his wife and family the way Christ does the Church and the crucifix is the model.

And not to pick on you guys this is true of us priests too. Oh, the temptations we have to take off the collar and tell people to not call us "father" – to strive to just to blend in and be "one of the crowd" among our parishioners.

To ignore the problems in the parish and let committees make the decisions-making it clear that *they* make the decisions not ourselves, so that if something goes wrong we can blame someone else.

--We are tempted to try to get out from our authority and responsibility. **Every man is tempted to this because this office men hold is not easy.** Who wants the burden of representing Jesus in their home of being asked to love to the degree that Christ loves his bride – to the point of laying down one's life.

What do the temptations look like for the man to resist this hard saying?

-It is the temptation of the father to shirk his responsibility to lead.

-To put all of the decision making burden on his wife. This way he doesn't have to deal with the messiness of life and when things go wrong with the kids he can blame his wife for it.

-He doesn't have a roman collar that he would be tempted to take off, but he's tempted to let his wife and kids know he's not on call in other ways. He buries himself in sports, or drink, or video games, or an online world, and just gives them one word answers to their attempts at conversation.

-He is tempted to leave the spiritual and religious formation of his children up to his wife. To only pray with the family if she initiates it, if even at all.

-He is tempted to use flashes of anger as his only tool of authority rather than patient and persistent formation of his children.

-He is tempted to escape into the fantasy life of pornography rather than to remain engaged in the daily battle for his family's soul.

-He is tempted to remain the boy just looking to have a little fun rather than the man who lays down his life for his bride.

So what are we to do? If we continue to take our cues from the culture the temptations all become the norm. But Christ is calling us today to listen to the hard saying. And like Peter and the Apostles did in John's Gospel when the doctrine of the Eucharist was revealed, to not walk

away. To trust that we have found the Messiah and he will give us the grace we need to live differently. Whenever God gives a mission he makes the grace available to fulfill it.

What then does the Family Circle according to Scripture look like -a Christian marriage based on God's description of it in Ephesians look like?

First, in the Christian understanding, authority is not equal to "power over others" but is meant for "service to others" - Christ tells the Apostles **"I have been with you as one who serves"** **"you will not lord your authority over others."** So the first thing is recognizing that God gives husbands and fathers real authority in their homes, but it is "for service" ; it is to complete their mission, and Christ gives that mission: **"Husband love your wives even as Christ loved the Church."**

You are meant to lead your family. **Like all the great patriarchs of the Old Testament you are meant to lead your family to God.** It is your function to initiate prayer in your family, not always waiting for your wife to conjole you. How many wives would be ecstatic if their husbands would lead a prayer or take the initiative to get their family to Mass, to worship – and this was normal for the patriarchs, they knew their mission was to lead their families to God.

Husbands you are called to protect your wives. Not only from physical threats from without, but from emotional threats from within. Particularly defending your wife from your children's backtalk or disrespect. The mother should not have to instill respect in her children for herself, that is the father's job – to immediately and forcefully communicate that disrespect of his wife will never be tolerated in his home. And of course never say anything disrespectful of one's wife to one's children, or anyone for that matter.

The Christian husband is called to make hard decisions for his family. He cannot push those off on his wife. **He can and must listen to her counsel, and listen well because it is clear that the authority he holds is based upon an office God has entrusted to him and not to any kind of superiority of his in expertise or wisdom.** And this is the crux of misunderstanding in the

modern world of gender differences – the Scriptures in referring to the man having an authority within the home is not saying the man is better, smarter, or anything else – it is saying that he holds an office from God.

Like me as a pastor- there are plenty of parishioners who are holier, smarter, better administrators, better speakers, better everything, - but it is I who hold the office of pastor and thus it is my authority and my responsibility. It is I, not the parish council president, who must give an account of my parish at the judgement seat– meaning either the day the Lord calls me home or when the Bishop calls me into his office. ☺ Men it won't do any good on judgement day to say "I didn't take the initiative in my family because it wasn't expected of me, or the culture I lived in said it was mean for me to assert leadership", -only you will be answerable on that day.

Christian wives, what does it mean to be subordinate to your husband to be under his authority. I remember a great line from the movie "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" the young woman getting married and her mom are talking.

Toula Portokalos: Ma, Dad is so stubborn. What he says goes. "Ah, the man is the head of the house!"

Maria Portokalos: Let me tell you something, Toula. The man is the head, but the woman is the neck. And she can turn the head any way she wants.

There is truth there.

Well first, the true follower, whether the wife subordinating herself to her husband or the church, us, subordinating ourselves to Christ, is not one who is passively dependent on the leader. No, it is one who actively assists that leader. A bad follower, drags a leader down. A bad follower never embraces the vision of the leader. A good follower embraces the vision of the leader and takes initiative to bring the vision to life. Our Lady herself was the neck that turned the Head of Christ at Cana! It was she who directed Jesus' gaze to the empty wine jars.

And even then he didn't plan to do anything until in her subtle feminine way simply said "do whatever he tells you." – the feminine genius 😊.

In a family, the wife's active and patient nurturing of her husband's vision brings it to life and if this sounds threatening, just remember what the mission of the husband is – to love his wife and family like that – the CROSS.

But also praying for him. How little we put our trust in prayer, and yet the Lord sets these bars so high so that we will have to turn to him, we'll have to rely on him to help. This is what the hard sayings do they drive us to implore him for grace–

Sometimes in marriage preparation meetings I will read this passage from Ephesians and I will ask the woman, "what do you think? Can you accept this?" And if she answers, "no!" I will say, "then I do not think you have found the right man yet. Because if you are fearful to be under this man's mission, if you are afraid to entrust yourself to him because you will somehow lose something, then he is not the one. Wait for a man to whom you can entrust yourself, someone you can really trust."

Now as a brief caution I hope it is obvious that if someone is in a marriage where they are being abused, where they are losing their identity, the Church would not ask them to remain, but would encourage them to separate. This advice is for "normal" marriages.

However, with that being said, some probably find themselves married or maybe divorced but still in involvement due to one's kids, with a spouse or ex-spouse who does not have the same vision. A spouse who may be actively working against a good Christian marriage. That is no excuse not to follow God's vision for you as husband or wife. This isn't about following this vision in order to be successful, it's about following it because it is God's Word and thus deserves obedience. We are called to do it because we are called to be obedient not because we are called to have the "successful Christian family."

Now speaking to the men for the remainder but women you can change what is needed and address to yourself – if you are like me – there are times when I feel like I have failed to such a degree that even to hear someone call me “father” grates my ears. When I have been absorbed in selfishness, when I have failed someone, when I remained silent when I should have spoken or spoken when I should have remained silent, and even to be reminded of my office as priest, as father, hurts.

I think the Lord has a great message of hope for us and our culture in the Scripture this evening – in the Scripture that was chosen for the dinner’s theme – where the theme family circle came from ACTS 16:34

These last few minutes I would like us to reflect on this message of hope. We have considered the state of war in the very foundation of the family in the war of genders and the war over gender. We have considered the hard teaching of the Lord in this area and hopefully have found ourselves challenged to more fully engage in our respective roles as men and women called to support and build up family.

But now where do we find hope for the culture, and where do we find hope for ourselves when we feel that we have failed in our roles, our mission.

To set up this reading, Paul and Silas have been arrested for being faithful Christians – they are in prison when an earthquake rocks the city and opens their jail cells for them.

Acts 16:27-34

When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul cried with a loud voice, **“Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.”** ²⁹ And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, ³⁰ and brought them out and said, **“Men, what must I do to be saved?”** ³¹ And they said, **“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”** ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his

house. ³³ And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their wounds, and he was baptized at once, with all his family. ³⁴ Then he brought them up into his house, and set food before them; and he rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God.

First, we have a man in darkness, despair, ready to kill himself. Why? Because he has failed at his mission.

As men we realize we didn't raise our children in the ways of God like we should have.

-we didn't protect the life of the child or the children entrusted to us

-we were dishonest for much of our life

-we allowed lust to carry us away and with it our integrity

-wherever the world, the flesh, or the devil stole our masculinity and our role – we find ourselves in the dark – and we shut down or we create some false bravado – but underneath we tell ourselves – I have failed, I am a fraud, I am not a leader, or a protector, or a father, or a husband, I am not a man...

And in that darkness tonight in God's word we hear: "Do no harm, for we are all here"

Paul and Silas – the Church (the Great Family Circle) – cries out – we are here- and the man is called out of his darkness – he calls for a light – he drops to his knees – and he asks for a new mission – he asks for the only mission that is important – "what must I do...to be saved?"

And they tell him and they tell us. They don't tell us we must go back and beat ourselves up again and again, that we must never try to assert our fatherhood or our strength again, that we must be forever neutered before the world, – no they say "Believe, Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

In light of the reflections tonight we can twist this just a bit and hear “you will be saved because you have believed” and “your household will be saved because they will have their Father back, they will have their dad or their brother.”

Brothers, satan wants you on the sideline. Most of the mess we are in is because men remained passive in the face of threat after threat to our Christian culture and to our Catholic way of life. The Family Circle is the foundation of the past that we stand upon – and it is the future. As the family fragments all around us, a small but growing number of men are looking to Christ and His Church for direction, for hope, for the world’s promises are failing even as they are being made...We pray for the grace to live the hard teaching in our life – to be the husbands and wives, the fathers and mothers, the men and women that will strengthen the great Family Circle.

I conclude with a prayer over you and as a bit of a model too. I call upon my office as priest and the promises from God that come with that. That I have an anointing as a priest to bless you with. Fathers, Mothers, when you pray – call upon the anointing the Lord has given you in the life of your family. You have been anointed as your children’s teachers and their providers – you hold an office, call upon that office. Remind God, that’s what he wants us to do – to remind him of his promises and so I pray over you now.....