



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Submission – The Real Path to Freedom

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

The 3rd Sunday of Advent, 2010

“My soul magnifies the Lord...” these words begin one of the world’s most radical exclamations. Mary expresses her amazement at having been chosen for such a precious ministry – the bearing of a child destined to change the world. The prospect is daunting; the implications are staggering. God has chosen a questionable vessel – an unwed teenage mother to be the vehicle for the incarnation. Not only is Mary honored, but so will be the shepherds, and the tax collectors and all other socially unacceptable people. Whether or not Mary was aware of all of this instantly, she overcame any fear and trepidation and simply said to God’s messenger, “Let it be with me according to your will.” She submitted to God’s will and surrendered her own. Mary is the ultimate example of the spiritual discipline of submission.

As with all of the spiritual practices that have been the Advent sermon topics, submission is not an end unto itself – the goal is freedom but not the kind of freedom that is bandied about so easily in our times. It’s not freedom to do exactly as you want when you want. It’s not the freedom of speech or freedom of the press. It’s not about rights. It’s about love. It is freedom from the need to be right and the need to get your way. It is freedom to love so much that you would rather see someone or a group of someones succeed or have what’s important to them rather than insisting on what you want. Just as the discipline of simplicity requires an inner transformation to move away from consumerism and the need for more, submission requires a change of focus from self orientation to one of mutual subordination, a spirit of consideration and deference. Jesus taught that in order to have real life, we need to die to self.

Any woman who has ever been pregnant knows the reason that Mary is a symbol of submission and deference. When there is a little person in residence, you no longer make decisions just for yourself. What you want to eat and drink must be weighed against the needs of the developing child. Fetal alcohol syndrome is a consequence of a woman’s inability to submit to abstinence for the good of the little other. In an ironic twist, this nine month period of ultimate life-giving creativity becomes an exercise of dying to self. Most women I know do it willingly, if a little wistfully at times. When our daughter-in-law KC was pregnant with Robbie, in a good example of shared submission, Brady joined her in abstaining from any caffeine and alcohol. I was proud of him for that.



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There are several places in the letters of Paul that talk about submission and we generally don't hear them well. I used to hear, "wives, submit to your husbands" and go "grrr!" But there is much that we need to understand here...first is that women (and children and slaves) were culturally expected to submit –that's just the way things were. But here Paul is telling them that it is their choice and that they are to do it because it was the way of Christ.

And then Paul does something that is revolutionary beyond our imagining. He calls men – from their position of dominance in the household and in the community – to be in reciprocal subordination. In his now much quoted book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says "For a first-century husband, father and master to obey Paul's injunction would make a dramatic difference in his behavior. The first-century wife, child and slave would not need to change one whit to follow Paul's command. If anything the sting of the teaching falls upon the dominant partner."

In the letter to the Ephesians, slaves are exhorted to live in a spirit of joyful, voluntary, willing service to their earthly masters. Then, in a jaw-dropping turn, those same masters are instructed "Do the same to them." Again, Foster says, "Such thought was incredible to first-century ears. Slaves were thought to be chattel, not human beings. Yet Paul with divine authority counseled master to give way to the needs of their slaves."

Imagine the implications today of such teaching. What if someone with enough authority told the CEOs of every Fortune 500 company – to submit voluntarily to the needs of the lowest paid employees of the company? Or what if those same companies were exhorted to practice the discipline of submission and give up some of that bottom line to create more jobs? What would the discipline of submission look like for the members of the NRA? We all apparently have the right to own and carry weapons, in fact, if this were Kentucky, most of you would be packing right now. But what if they gave up their hand guns and semi-automatic weapons voluntarily so that fewer children might die in gun related accidents? That would truly require a dying to self and self-will.

This discipline of submission is really the crux of Christianity. Never is that word "crux" more aptly used than here because it means literally "cross." Richard Foster writes that "Christ not only died a cross-death, He lived a cross-life...Jesus lived in submission to his fellow human beings. He was the servant of all."



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In the formative years of the ancient church it was often dismissed by the surrounding Greek and Roman culture as of no account, because it was just a religion of women and slaves. I read in some church publication about the difficulty of churches in Latin countries to attract men. The issue, it seems is that Christianity, with all of that love and dying to self and submission stuff just isn't very macho. So the women of Central and South America go to church by themselves. I don't believe that the issue exists in the US to quite the same extent, but Peter and I have talked a lot about how difficult it is for men to reconcile ideas like submission with the messages of our culture with the emphasis on success and winning. Gentlemen of Trinity, I'd love to hear your thoughts on the subject. When the exemplar of the discipline of submission is a pregnant girl, how do you identify with it?

As with all of the disciplines, there is a caveat, and with submission there must be for it has been the most abused of all of the disciplines. How many women have been told to just submit and stay in marriages in which they are abused, physically or emotionally? The limits of this discipline are found when it becomes destructive. When someone is robbed of their dignity, health, safety, or personhood, it is no longer a path to life-giving freedom but becomes a way of sin and death. No one can be coerced into spiritual submission any more than you can be coerced into love. It is valid only when it is voluntary.

There are moments throughout each day when we can ask ourselves – do I need to win here? Can I put what I want aside and let go of it? Can I be a servant leader and find satisfaction or even joy that someone else's needs are met? Richard Foster lists seven specific opportunities to practice submission; to God, to Scripture, to our families, to our neighbors, to our community of faith, to the broken and despised and finally to world as an interdependent community and an ecosystem.

Submission and the freedom that it brings has the power to change the world and make us truly ready for Christ to be born in us. Mary's song will be our song "My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior."