

## **Sermon for September 20, 2009: The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost**

I have heard more than once the apocryphal story of a prominent intellectual who was invited to receive an honorary degree at Sewanee, our Episcopal college in Tennessee.

This imminent professor at a much more important university had some questions about the ceremony and festivities before he accepted the invitation, the sort of questions a prominent professor might ask before agreeing to visit a little church college down South.

He was told that the culmination of the conferral of the degree would be the moment when he knelt before the Chancellor of the University, then the Bishop of Mississippi, who would be wearing a purple academic gown over his episcopal vestments.

The bishop would take the great man's hands into his own, speak some words in Latin, and the Doctor of Letters would be conferred, *honoris causa*, as they say.

The prominent intellectual said, "I am sorry, but by no means may I accept your invitation. I kneel for no one and certainly not a bishop."

This is the spirit of our age; we are a stiff-necked and independent people, not inclined to submit ourselves to anyone.

That is the verse I'd isolate from the lesson from James for my theme today, "Submit yourselves therefore to God."

Five words, a clear imperative, but so hard to do.

Now, I am using the arrogant academic as a foil, perhaps unfairly.

His discomfort is one I do not share; I have knelt before plenty of bishops, seeking confirmation, ordination, and a job in ministry.

But his point might be one to consider, for this reason;

The call to submit to God, to be obedient to the Lord Jesus, has so often

been translated into a call to obedience to some human figure who wants to claim that submission for himself.

And so we hear in some of the letters of the New Testament, the later letters that claim to be Paul's but are not, some of the most painful exhortations in all of religious literature.

In Titus 2:9, "Tell slaves to submit to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior."

There submission to the most inhuman of labor extraction systems is recast as fidelity to God.

A few verses before we hear that young women are to be "submissive to their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited."

The writer of Titus was sure that the way forward for the church was to make its peace with the world's way of doing business, of blessing the structures of submission that placed men over women, the free over the enslaved, and eventually the Greek over the Jew.

This is a long way from Paul's liberating and authentic message that because of death and resurrection of Jesus, we are a new creation in which there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, no longer Jew or Greek, for Christ is all in all.

So I have some sympathy for that arrogant intellectual and for all of you who are not inclined to submit to human authority.

There are days I wish you would, but perhaps we Americans are faithful rebels.

So much evil has been done by humans who used God's glory and God's call to submission as a pretext for their own selfish ambitions.

The extremely capable wife in our lesson from Proverbs seems to have excelled in her role as house worker, mother, wife, investor and breadwinner.

To the degree that she felt called to those roles and was ready to respond, I give thanks for the passage.

To the degree that this superwoman regime was imposed on her by a husband who demanded submission, I regret it.

The disciples walking along to Capernaum were obviously falling prey to the ancient temptation.

Called by Jesus to submit to his leadership, they were working out the next level of hierarchy, deciding who was next greatest, who would be forced to submit to whom, as though Jesus wanted them to reduce the apostolic community to a corporate flow chart.

The Lord was troubled as they revealed this tragic conversation to him and took up a child to make his point.

A child in the first century, as today but even more so, was subject to everyone.

Any adult in Capernaum could give a child directions, punishment, or reproof. It was that way in our world not so long ago.

So Jesus was inviting the disciples to a form of life in which they would submit to all and all would submit to them, a world of mutual submission to God and to one another, a world of mutual service.

That is our dream here in the body of Christ, submission not to higher individuals, but an ever-weakening sense of individualism, as our mutual submission to Christ and one another because ever more clear.

None of us, by word or deed or style of leadership, is called to invite another to any submission than mutual submission to Christ.

And we are that good much of the time, as James says, "peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits," avoiding conflicts and disputes about precedence, power, and authority.

We are that good when Jesus' death and resurrection are ever before us.

When we remember his washing their feet, his carrying the cross, his ministering to the thief crucified at his side.

When we live with vision of the Cross, remembering the Lord's willing submission to the mysterious will of the Father, then our path is clear.

We are a people who submit to no one, to no one other than the Lord who submitted for our sake.

And there we gladly kneel.