

Ephesians 5:21
“Subjects of Reverence”

Rev. David Pierce
April 15, 2018

When Moira and I were first married, we lived in Virginia just a few miles down the road from Williamsburg and more specifically, Busch Gardens. We weren't in Virginia but a couple weeks when someone in the church gifted us seasons passes to the park. “Everyone has them and everyone goes,” they told us, “you should too.” Uh huh, I said. Amusement Parks—bumper to bumper traffic leading down the highway to a place filled with \$20 parking spaces from which you must walk 1 mile under the blistering sun for the thrill of paying \$60 per day for the privilege of getting \$5 watered-down coca-colas, \$9 chicken fingers, \$6 kiddie cones, and loopy-loop rollercoasters that will cause you, or the person riding next to you, to give it all up in under 2 seconds.

“Everyone goes,” they told us, “you should too.” Uh huh.

I guess I can't claim to really be much of an amusement park fan. And yet, I've always wanted to be. Well, traffic, parking lots, and concession stand food aside, I've always wanted to be. Or at least I've always wanted to be a thrill seeker. Well, actually, I've always wanted to be more than just a thrill *seeker*. I mean let's face it, thrill seekers aren't all that thrilling. They're like the guy who shows up at the sporting event and straps on his headphones so he can listen to the game that is going on right in front of him. Sitting there in the third row just off the first base line, he can feel the roar of the crowd and the sweat of the players. And yet, he might as well be sitting at home in his den watching the game on T.V., listening to someone else talk about it. I know there is something to be said for getting this close to the action. I mean, not even the most death-defying daredevil would dare to walk into a tornado. There are certain thrills that we should only seek. Let someone else do the conquering. For me, though, I've always wanted to be that guy who came off as being just a little unbalanced, unpredictable enough to suddenly go and do what everyone else is just standing around talking about doing. To throw off caution and get taken up by the tornado. But alas, Moira will tell you, I'm just a thrill *seeker*, and not much of one at that. As the person who has to stand in line for the front row of the roller coaster and then put up with the humiliation and disappointment of me backing out at the last minute (and not just backing out of the front row but backing out of the ride all together), she'll tell you I'm not worth the season pass or the \$5 kiddie cone.

There was, mind you, this one time, I remember it all too well, when we did get on the ride—this one not at Busch Gardens but at Disney World—the Tower of Terror. (I’m going back to Disney World in August. I’m not, however, going back to the Tower of Terror.) The name alone should have been enough to keep me from even getting in line, but in classic non-thrill seeker thrill seeking fashion, I got on.

I sat down in a seat that was part of a row of about 6 other seats. I think Moira was on my left. I’ve tried to block out the memory some. I didn’t know the person on my right.

“Have you been on this before?” I asked them.

“We came to Disney last year and I wanted to go on it but I wasn’t tall enough yet. I’m only 9.

Great, I thought. I was 27 and wishing someone had told me I wasn’t tall enough.

The ride began. At first nothing seemed to be happening. We went forward a little, backed up a little, but nothing that felt like going up or down. This is how they do it, they miss with you by making you think it’s no big deal and then, when you least expect it, a door flies open in front of you, you’re 1,000 feet off the ground and you’re plummeting towards your death. And then, when you don’t die, they try to kill you again. You go up, then down, then up, then down. This happens 5, 6, 7 times. Enough times for me but not enough times apparently for the 9-year old, who when the ride is over, asks, “Is that it?”

If ever there was a book in the Bible that is meant to give us a picture of the Christian life as a thrill-seeking adventure, it’s got to be the book of Ephesians, written by the Apostle Paul. We heard read only 1 of the 155 verses in the whole book this morning, but just listen to Paul’s opening line: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.”

Blessed us in Christ? In the one we know to have lived an ordinary life, a life not so unlike our lives, who suffered the betrayal of friends, the hardships of living in a blended and broken family, who endured the pain of dying alone, and who redeemed it all, overcoming and claiming life again, in this one we are blessed? Yes.

Blessed us with every spiritual gift in the heavenly places? You mean this world isn’t all we stand to get? That even while we walk this pilgrim path there is goodness all

around us? The mustard seed can move a mountain, the sword can be melted into a plowshare, even the dog get a bite to eat off the table of princes and kings? In this one we are blessed with every spiritual gift in the heavenly places? Yes.

And chosen before the foundation of the world? In this one? Really? We who get passed over for the promotion, for the little league team, for the part we worked so hard to get but didn't get? We who can't stand not to be loved but who hardly love well ourselves? In Christ we were chosen before the foundation of the world? How could he? Before he knew how we'd turn out, how we'd look. He chose us anyway? Yes.

We best sit down and strap in. This ride Paul has us on is indeed thrilling and it's just getting going. Chapter 2: "It's by grace you have been saved. This is not your own doing. It is the gift of God." How marvelous! That though we were dead in our trespasses and sins, though we couldn't get anything right, God, in God's amazing grace, made us right. So we don't have to compete, not with ourselves, not with one another, and certainly not with God. There is no longer an us versus them, a me not you. In Christ we are made one and what is more, we are given the authority to beat back injustice, to challenge every system of oppression, and to put in its place an agenda for inclusion based on love.

Now we are above the treetops, where we can see the whole world laid bare, where we can see just how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ is for all creation.

Chapter 4: "This I affirm and insist on in the Lord; you must no longer live as you once did." Don't live as a prisoner of your own thinking. Don't lose your tenderness for the poor and the violent of the earth. Throw off your greed and ignorance. That is not the way you learned in Christ! In Christ the first shall be last, the poor in spirit are blessed. In Christ there is no seeking revenge, no holding grudges. There is only, forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven you. And do not worry if you don't think you can do it, if you're not sure you can handle the ride, for in Christ God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask for or imagine.

Paul wants us to see that maybe this ride we are on, this life we are living, maybe there is nothing so scary about it after all. Like it's one great thrilling adventure and we should all seek it. Which brings me to a question: are you feeling thrilled yet? I mean, I know some people who can't stand not to be thrilled. They come to church looking for a thrill. Take my breath away. If you don't, I'll get bored of just sitting around waiting for

something more to happen and I'll drop out of line and go check out another ride—another church. So, the church has taken to making a commercial out of things, like we're the cable company with enough programming for everyone.

On the other hand, I know people who just want the thrill of life to stop. They can't take another unexpected drop. They've had enough thrill for one lifetime. And they look for space, for communities and churches to be a part of, where they can rest.

I thought about this and had John 21 read for us, the disciples a week or two after the resurrection of Jesus. After seeing him crucified, his body put into the grave, they've now also seen him resurrected, and it makes them think, this is it, he's back and he's going to kick down the door of the Pharisees and Roman soldiers, he's going to take revenge on Pontius Pilate. He's going to take the keys to the kingdom away from him and give them to us. But instead, after appearing to them, Jesus then disappears again. And the disciples all go, "That's it? There's nothing more?" And that's when, according to John, Simon Peter announces that he's going fishing, and all the other disciples say, "We'll come, too. We got nothing else better to do." Out on the water nothing is biting though. The boys can't catch a thing, until someone—at first they don't know who—tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. They do and now their nets are so full they can't possibly haul in the catch. It's a thrilling moment, and this is when Simon Peter realizes it's Jesus! So full of excitement he jumps out of the boat stark naked and swims to shore. On the beach, gathered around a fire and eating breakfast the disciples can barely contain their excitement.

"Will you tell us now Jesus? What's the plan of attack? How are we going to take on the world?"

"Feed my lambs and tend my sheep."

"What? I don't think I heard you right Jesus. Did you say feed my lambs and tend my sheep?"

"Yes."

"Well, alright. But what else? There must be more. What comes next? A building, a committee, an agenda?"

"No, there's nothing more. Just feed my lambs and tend my sheep. That's it."

Doesn't sound like very thrilling work does it? Like very important work. And yet it's the very work Jesus comes all the way back from the grave to do. It's the work Paul calls the Ephesians to do. "You are blessed, you are holy, you are saved by grace, you can do things beyond imagination, out of reverence for the One who has called you by name, be subject to one another. Paul goes on to say that wives should be subject to their husbands, and husbands should love their wives as Christ loves the church. In another place, he says that citizens should be subject to their governmental leaders. Give to God what is God's and to Caesar what is Caesar's. He doesn't tell us what to do should though if the husband is abusive, or the wife is abusive. He doesn't tell us what to do when our governments act corrupt. Or what if in a marriage there is no husband or wife, or the couple is gay or would be in a same sex marriage. What are we to do then? Are we still to be subject to one another? Paul doesn't say. He says only, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."

Eugene Peterson says that the church is the one place where we don't get to be in charge of who we are. The church insists that we are members of one another, subjects of one another. That we belong to another.

I don't know how that sits with you as you look around to your left and right. As you look at me. Do you love those to whom you belong? Enough to be subject to one another? Let us only tend and feed one another, for in so doing we will leave no doubt that we do indeed love one another.