

From “raised with Christ” to “subject to your husbands” (Colossians 3:1-11)

How would the women of Colossae have responded to chapter 3?

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For Christians in traditions that use a lectionary, the overall experience of scripture is shaped by the pattern the lectionary forms.

With its three readings each Sunday and the precedence it gives the reading from the Gospels, the Revised Common Lectionary directs us to pay attention to one thing and not another. As an Episcopal priest, I know the lectionary well. As a biblical scholar and teacher, I beseech my students and colleagues to read and to teach beyond the lectionary—and to appreciate each New Testament book in its own integrity. Especially the epistles, which on many Sundays are either overlooked or grazed for ideas to supplement a sermon on the Gospel.

The opening four verses of this week’s lection from Colossians also comprise the exultant reading for Easter Day in Year A. Here in Year C the longer text is assigned on this summer Sunday, the last in a series of four excerpts from Colossians.

Not included in the Sunday lectionary is the passage from this epistle that has had the greatest historical effects on social arrangements in the family and in the church. In the “household code,” which follows a few verses after this week’s reading, the writer exhorts wives to be subject to their husbands, children to obey their parents, and slaves to obey their masters (3:18-4:2). While it comes as a relief not to have to hear the Colossians household code proclaimed as the word of the

Lord—and perhaps also not to have to preach on it—its absence in public reading in Sunday worship makes it too easy to avoid the challenges it poses.

In a feminist commentary on Colossians I wrote with Claire Miller Colombo—for the Wisdom Commentary series from Liturgical Press—we asked how the women in the congregation who affirmed that they had been “raised with Christ,” as this week’s reading puts it, would have accepted the instruction to be subject to their husbands. How could the slaves who had been baptized in a renewal where it was proclaimed that “there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!” accept the words “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything”?

An even more urgent question is about the present: How do we who read Colossians interpret the tension between the transformation that comes with baptism and the re-establishment of the imperial order of society that is expressed in the household code? Do we, who affirm that Christ’s death disarmed the rulers and authorities (2:15), believe that in Christ we will continue to work against the violent relationships that disfigure this world? Can we ourselves put away evil and be clothed “with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator”?