

Faith Mennonite Church
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Families, Singleness, and Marriage, week 3
Phil Stoltzfus

A Singular Purpose I Corinthians 7; Matthew 19

Here at Faith we are currently in the midst of a series on families, singleness, and marriage, and today our theme is singleness. Now, I am not single. But I used to be! And I would imagine that close to 100% of us here either *are* single or *used* to be single at one point in our lives. And later in life some of us who are married are going to find ourselves to be single once more. So this topic is relevant not only to those who are single, but also to every one of us, as we try to negotiate our shifting sense of personal identity throughout life in relating to significant others, to nuclear and extended families, and to the variety of communities in which we find ourselves. How does a sense of being single or of being a singular individual relate to our understanding of Christian discipleship and to that singular purpose that we call living within the kingdom of God?

Last month, just before Valentine's Day, MSNBC ran an article with the headline, "Why being single is better for your body." A study of 7,000 young adults determined that marriage doubles your risk of becoming obese—you simply eat more when culinary temptation is multiplied by 2. Another study of 13,000 adults found that married or previously married people exercise nearly an hour a week less than single people do. A third study of 4,400 adults revealed that single women enjoy significantly higher levels of mental health. Yet another study finds that when you're a couple, you suffer 50% more sleep disturbances. The conclusion? Flying solo makes you a healthier human being!

Well, that's pretty much exactly the same conclusion we get from the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7. Being married, he argues, creates a lot of extra anxiety because you're always preoccupied with the relationship. And besides, the world is facing an impending crisis—the present form of the world is passing away, he goes on to say, so why would you want to put so much energy into getting married and trying to raise kids, anyway? This is an example of the apocalyptic trajectory that runs through the New Testament. And by the way, Paul was right on target about that—within ten years of writing this he and Peter would be executed at the hands of the emperor Nero, and a few years later revolt would break out in the Middle East, Jerusalem would be sacked, and the Second Temple destroyed. Given such a dismal cultural and political outlook—one might say that Paul is giving the Corinthians pretty good advice: "It's best to be an unmarried, unattached itinerant tentmaker just like me—footloose and fancy free—not burdened by marriage and family life. You can get more done if you're single, and you'll be healthier, too!"

But there's also a deeper message in this teaching, beyond these specific and somewhat idiosyncratic recommendations about singleness. Paul is a pragmatist on this issue. If you really need to or want to, he says, get married. The two shall become one flesh and all that. Okay, fine. Or be single. That's great, too. It's interesting to note, from a biblical interpretation perspective, that he explicitly states that there is no "command of the Lord" on this. This isn't God's word, he's saying, it's just my own personal opinion. In fact, the overall impression one gets is, don't overthink this sexuality issue. Don't over-sacralize or over-theologize it. Yes, marriage, singleness, and sexuality are important dimensions of life that we all need to work through. Indeed, it's what we have in common with every other human being. Every one of us is given a unique gift in this area. So why get so spiritually obsessed about it? Why use up all the church's oxygen trying to manage and

regulate it all the time? There are other things happening in the world, too, that God is interested in, beyond the issue of your relationship status!

In the Reformation era, this Pauline approach to sexuality was particularly emphasized by Martin Luther. Neither the vocation of the single monastic or priest, nor the institution of marriage, were any longer to be considered to have sacramental importance. Your marital status, he argued, does not in itself symbolize anything about the promise of salvation in Jesus Christ. Baptism? Yes. The Lord's Supper? Yes. Those remain as key ritual practices of the church. But staying single by taking a vow of celibacy and joining a religious order? No, not particularly. Getting married? Nope—not a sacrament. Relationship status was to be considered a part of what we might call the secular dimensions of life. Marriage is not a particularly Christian institution, either, just look at—so the argument would go in the 16th century—what one would find among Muslim brothers and sisters over there in Turkey. You're not *more* religious or *more* spiritual or *more* Christian simply by being married, nor simply by being single! This is the pragmatic, secularizing, Pauline approach that is characteristic of Protestant and also American traditions, of which this congregation is a part.

In today's passage from Matthew 19, Jesus affirms this view, too, but with an added twist. Jesus was not married (as far as we know), yet he *does* support getting married. But like Paul he considers marriage to be a difficult commitment to enter into, and divorce should not be taken lightly, with due consideration, he says, for cases of unfaithfulness—and, it bears some reminding, that from a pacifist perspective the introduction of abuse and violence into any relationship would be a case of unfaithfulness, of a lack of faith, as well. Then when the disciples try to call his bluff and say, “So Jesus, what you're really saying is that being single is *better*?” Jesus says, “Yeah!” And he goes on, surprisingly, to cite the example in society of the eunuch in positive terms! So, what's that about? In the bible, a “eunuch” is someone who for whatever reason has the identity of a single person—a sort of, we might say, sexual minority in a marriage-dominant society. A eunuch lives without the expectation of having a family or having children, often, in antiquity, serving as an official, or member of a court. Needless to say, this style of life might well have seemed quite foreign to the sensibilities of the pious Jewish young people of Jesus' day—who were expected to marry and have children as a moral and religious *duty*—a matter of Torah. But Jesus goes against the norm on this issue, teaching that such models of singleness as represented by the eunuch could themselves be considered a mark of the kingdom.

And in the very next scene (as Matthew arranges the text) we find Jesus praising children—“let the little children come to me.” Another example of singleness in society. Not only are children a *part* of the kingdom, but the kingdom *belongs* to them, he says. But what does the single disciple have, in the eyes of society, Peter asks, if he or she hasn't gained the benefit of family and wealth and recognition, and rather has taken on the singular purpose of being a follower of Jesus and “child” of God? The new kingdom, the new creation that we are bringing into existence, will offer you, says Jesus, 100 times more benefits than what the old way of life could offer. Those that society doesn't favor, for reasons of wealth, ethnicity, gender, or (as in this passage) sexuality or relationship status—those are the ones who will be favored. The last will be first and the first will be last. The eunuch, the child, the single disciple, then, becomes for Jesus a parable—a symbol—for what the Beloved Community is like. God's kingdom is populated by the so-called “outcast” of society, or what New Testament Greek labels “little ones” or “little children.” The new kingdom brings to reality in its very essence and meaning an empowerment from below for all who experience in one way or another the oppressed and beleaguered dimensions of the human experience—now transformed, saved, enlivened, and sustained by the Spirit of God, and by that *single person* from Galilee, who marched up to Jerusalem, as a single person, and challenged everything.

There are all sorts of ways that the Christian tradition spiritualizes and theologizes, and thus makes normative, the institution of heterosexual marriage. One way of interpreting the imagery of the Song of Solomon, for example, is that Israel becomes the bride of Yahweh. In the New Testament, the Church becomes the bride of Christ, without spot or wrinkle (as the Anabaptists loved to point out). At Christmas you have the “holy family,” and in Christian art the veneration of motherhood in the figure of the Virgin Mary. Then there is Mother’s Day, and Father’s Day—all kinds of ways whereby in church, in culture, and in law we endow the image of a man and a woman united in holy matrimony with a kind of divine status. And then the nuclear family, in turn, can sometimes become the model for the church as the family of God, and so on and on. Now to be sure, married couples and families sure *could* use a little encouragement now and then. And when you need it, believe me, there’s a whole lot of theology that’s available to come to your aid and support, whether you want it or not.

But sisters and brothers, there is quite another trajectory to the Christian tradition that we should also recognize on a day like today. The disciples and people around Jesus who made up the Jesus movement apparently were, from the evidence that we have, largely single people. In the third century, men and women went out into the Egyptian desert to find God by living as hermits—by cultivating the ascetic life of individual solitude. Later, religious orders developed where significant portions of society would take vows to live the single life dedicated to God. The medieval mystics developed a spiritual practice involving the journey of the individual soul toward mystical union with God. The whole notion of a contemplative dimension of life is one that more and more people, even more Mennonites, are discovering to be fundamental to their sense of spiritual direction. Or consider the model, as in Christian Peacemaker Teams, of the activist life, in which mobility and freedom from traditional family duties becomes an inherent value in the work of nonviolent action and violence reduction. Single people, in our community, could be considered signs of that dimension of freedom in Christ that has renewed the church and the church’s mission throughout history.

But do we really want to put singleness up on a pedestal? Endowing singleness with special spiritual significance—setting up a special category in church life for the “vocation” of the single person, say? Maybe make some Sunday to be Singles Day, where we give gifts to single people?! The problem with this is, of course, that many times those of us who are single haven’t chosen to be single, or would really prefer not to be single. (The same goes for married people, too, by the way—those who are married would sometimes rather be single!) We do well to keep in mind Paul’s perspective—that marital status is not a mark of particular spiritual significance in the church or in Christian theology, and that we’re being unfaithful, ultimately, when we get preoccupied with sexuality issues and gender- or sexuality-based categories and assumptions in our church life and church polity.

And yet, I think Jesus is asking us to think about something fundamental, here, with this issue of singleness. I’m tempted to leave you with a provocative idea that I find implicit within today’s texts, and that points us toward something which is absolutely central to our faith. Brothers and sisters, in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity we worship one God. Yahweh, the center of all compassion, mercy, justice, liberation, and love. And the last time I checked, *God was not married*. God is One. God’s relationship status is, “Single!” What would happen if we were to see those in our community who are single as being signs, symbols, pointers, in our midst, toward the reality of what God is like? A God of oneness and singleness of purpose. Friends, can we not celebrate, today, the single person, and indeed celebrate each one of us as singular persons? As single, each one of us, in ourselves and at our very root, carry within the image of the singular body of Christ in the world, and thereby also we carry within us the image, ultimately, of the living Single One—the image of God. That is the charge and challenge for us, today. Amen.