

9 October 2016

Good News for the Unmarried
1 Corinthians 7:8-11, 25-28; Ruth 1:6-18

Sometimes the Apostle Paul was confident that what he had to say was from God. Other times, he explicitly said that he didn't have a word from God. But, being Paul, he still had opinions. On the subject of marriage, we read 1 Corinthians 7, verses 8-11 and 25-28:

To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practising self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion. To the married I give this command — not I but the Lord — that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that, in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that.

Paul spoke about unmarried people in the abstract, so maybe it would be good to look at a real example. In Ruth chapter 1 we meet Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth, both recently widowed. We read verses 6-18:

Then [Naomi] started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had had consideration for his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.' Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people.' But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.' Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.' But Ruth said,

*'Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;*

*your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die —
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!*
When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Jesus Christ was the Son of God. Though one with the Father, he was born on earth, fully human – the Creator becoming one of the created – emptying himself of the privileges of being God. Why did he do this? To restore relationship between God and the world he loved, especially that creature in the world who had been made in God’s own image. On earth, Jesus was killed, but he rose from the dead, and in so doing, he made it possible for our restored relationship with God to pass beyond death itself. This is the gospel story, and everything about it is good news. No matter who you are, how old, what color, or what race you are, this is equally good news for you. This, in short, is what I’ve been preaching for more than a month. I’ve explained the good news and said again and again that it applies equally to all of us. But before I wrap up the series next week, I want to talk about the gospel in light of one more distinct group: single people.

So let’s start with Paul’s words about the unmarried that you heard from 1 Corinthians 7. Did that at all odd to you? Let me summarize his advice: “It’s probably best not to get married. If you aren’t married yet, my advice to you is to stay single, like I am. If you *have* to marry – for instance, because of your own sexual needs – that’s technically not a sin. Go ahead. But singleness should be the goal, if possible.” Yes, that’s what he says. For Paul, singleness is the standard, and marriage is permitted as a concession for people with poor impulse control. After all, as Paul proclaims from the lofty heights of his own single wisdom, *those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that.*

So, yeah, I’m glad that Paul specified that in this passage he had no direct revelation but was just giving his own opinion. [By the way – a brief sidetrack here – I’ve never been sure what biblical inerrantists, the ones who say that every word of scripture comes directly from God, do with this. How do they deal with a passage where Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, says that what he’s saying is not inspired by the Holy Spirit?] But even if this is just Paul speaking here, it’s still curious. It’s evident that we’re dealing with some major differences between the 1st century church and that of our own time. In our churches, we’ve made the “traditional family” the norm, not the single person. We design our church programs for families with children, we do evangelism programs designed to reach new families, and in our congregation we hold “Family Camps.” Sure, technically, everyone’s welcome to the Family Camp, and if we remember, we’ll even say that. But we don’t always remember. The two-parent family with kids is sort of the gold standard for the church today. In fact, in some branches of Christianity, the word “Family” is basically interchangeable with the word “Christian.” Thus we have Family Radio (which means songs about Jesus) and support Family Values (which is code for conservative Christian morality.)

That's what we're used to, so Paul's preference for single Christians sounds really weird today. Now, some point out that Paul genuinely believed that Jesus would return any day – well, he says so in our reading: “in view of the impending crisis” – so a part of his anti-marriage perspective is that time is short and we really shouldn't be making long-term plans. But I don't really buy that argument. Paul is always making long-term plans: “I'm on my way to Macedonia, then Asia, to collect the offering for Jerusalem, then after I drop off that collection in Jerusalem, I plan to go to Rome and after that to Spain.” No, it's more than just a scheduling thing. Clearly, to Paul, singleness is a gift of God that is of great value both to the individual and to the church.

In what way? Well, that's not entirely clear. In this passage, Paul seems to say that the reason it's preferable to stay unmarried is that without the distractions of spouse and children single people can be more wholly focused on God – like Paul is. As a broad generalization, that's pretty dubious. I know single people just *love* being told that they must have all the time in the world, as if not having a family meant not having a life. Besides, Paul uses himself as an example, and I'm not sure he's a perfect role model for singleness. For my part I suspect that if Paul had had a wife he might have developed some interpersonal skills that would have benefitted his ministry. But whatever its advantage is, you can't deny that for many people through history, starting with Jesus of Nazareth, the path of singleness has been an important part of their journey of faith. So at the very least we have to acknowledge that being single does *not* mean you are incomplete. You have a different, but parallel, faith journey.

Still, though, doesn't the Bible say that we aren't supposed to be alone? God made Eve because “it is not good for man to be alone,” right? Well, yes. That's true. We were created from the beginning to be in relationship with God and others. So, to deal with that, let's look at our second scripture, the story of Ruth.

This book begins with a famine in the land of Judah. To feed his family, a man of Bethlehem named Elimelech took his wife Naomi and two sons out of Judah becoming a refugee in the land of Moab. There, the two sons both married Moabite women – Ruth and Orpah. Then in rapid succession all three men died, leaving three widows. Without a support system in Moab, Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem. At first, her two daughters-in-law pack up to go with her. But, in the passage we read earlier, Naomi tells them to leave. “Go back to your families; you're still young. You can find another husband and have children. I've got nothing to offer you.”

So there's that “traditional family” stuff. Ruth and Orpah had gotten married, but were single again. Naomi, assuming that married-with-children is every woman's goal, tells them they should do whatever will get them married. Orpah leaves, but Ruth does not. She says: *Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!* Ever hear that speech before? If you have, it was probably at a wedding, because it's a beautiful vow of love and faithfulness. Which wasn't originally about a traditional marriage. In fact, it's kind of an anti-wedding speech. Ruth is rejecting the traditional family pattern in favor of a new kind of household, two widows from different cultures and nations vowing faithfulness to each other.

Yes, we all need community, relationship, and love. But what we call the *traditional* family is neither the only nor, for some, the best place to find that love and community. Sometimes traditional family doesn't happen. Sometimes it happens and doesn't work. Sometimes it falls apart. In those cases, family has to be put together from whatever building blocks of love you have. That's us. The church at its best consists of the raw material – building blocks of love – for constructing community.

For at least 60-70 years, the church has been obsessed with one expression of family, which we've called "traditional," and we've designed our churches around that definition, and that definition only. Sure, some larger churches have also had separate "Singles Ministries," but – forgive me if I'm wrong – I've always thought those programs looked like dating services, designed to help those poor single people to not be single anymore. We as a church have not valued singles nor benefitted from their gifts nor been intentional about creating communities with a place for them. Paul would be aghast at how we've marginalized the unmarried. And we've reaped the predictable results. By and large, singles just don't come to church, feeling that we have no place for them. Because usually we don't. This is how this topic fits into a sermon series on the gospel. Any time a church excludes anyone from the community of faith, that is an affront to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We can do better. Unfortunately, I don't have any brilliant ideas on how. We could change "Family Camp" to "Community Camp"? But that's superficial, and besides, it sounds like a New Deal program. "Messy Church" shows some promise in that it invariably ends up scattering traditional families around in different activities and fostering a sense of a larger family, but that's just one occasional activity. I'm open to other ideas.

And we need them. This is another one of the ways in which society is changing. Whether we in the church have noticed it or not, singleness is well on its way to becoming the norm in our culture. Many people are never getting married today, and those who do are staying single longer. Many who have been married are so no longer. Single is big these days. As they say on Facebook: it's trending. So, at the very least, perhaps we could recognize that for a couple of generations now we've sort of overlooked people like Paul and, I don't know, Jesus, who don't get married and have two kids and a minivan. And overlooking people – that's not the gospel.