

adults also participate in these community groups, singles do so at a higher rate. In fact, most studies show that singles spend more time with people than do married adults and that includes between husbands and wives. That is a whole other sermon.

Singles are showing how to be intentional in community building and fellowship. It takes effort and intentionality. Interestingly, one of our core values at Trinity is fellowship and the statement is that we value intentional fellowship. We say as a church we value the intentional act of building community. We recognize that this does not happen by chance, but true community takes effort and our time.

Single adults do this naturally and this is another gift they have to offer to us... the church. They can model for us intentional community.

The last quality I want to mention is solitude. Solitude is the ability to be alone and not be lonely.

It was said of Jesus that He would retreat alone to lonely places, but in those lonely places He would spend time with God. Solitude is the ability to be alone, even in lonely places, however to be completely comfortable because you know of God's presence. It is amazing how many of us struggle with being alone. That is especially true if you are an extrovert and get your energy from others. However solitude and silence are important disciplines for spiritual life. In particular, to go away to be by ourselves and to be silent before God's word is a practice for us all.

Richard Foster reminds us in his book on Solitude "Loneliness is inner emptiness but solitude is inner fulfillment." When we have the Holy Spirit living in us, we can be filled and not be alone wherever we might find ourselves.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Life Together: "Let him who cannot be alone beware of community... Let him who is not in community beware of being alone... Each by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair."

Please don't misunderstand me. I know there are married people who live in a house filled with people who know how to practice solitude and silence before God and God's words, and there are single adults who can not

sit in silence even though they are alone in their home. What I am saying today is that solitude is something that we need to practice and single adults who live alone have the opportunity to be an example of this for us all.

When I began the preparation for this sermon series, over a month ago, I put out a request over our Church Facebook page and asked single adults to respond to me about what they would want the church to know about them. One looking at my sermon title responded. What is this "whole person" idea? I have never felt as a partial person. To which I responded "exactly."

That is what Paul is saying to us. We are whole whether we are married or whether we are single. We are all called to follow Jesus right now. Together we can practice discipline, contentment, community and solitude. Remember, Paul is right. This world is passing away and Christ is always coming and we are called to be faithful as we are, where we are, to the glory of God.



MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE

One Is A Whole Number

1 Corinthians 7: 1-7, 25-40

TRINITY PULPIT

In September of 2014, the demographic figures finally revealed what many had been expecting for some time. Namely, for the first time in American history, there were more single adults than married adults in the United States. According to the demographics, for the first time people who were single adults were over half of the population. Interestingly, they use 16 as the place where they consider someone adult. This would skew this to some degree. In addition, the delayed marriage age we are witnessing in our culture is another reason for the rise in the number, but you cannot simply explain this away. The truth is the United States is now mirroring the cultures of Europe, especially Northern Europe in regards to these cultural shifts.

In 1976 there were only 37% of adults living as single adults in the United States. Now the figure is somewhere around 51%. In the first decade of this century, the number of single adults grew from 3 million to 15.7 million, while the number of married couples stayed constant.

This shift in culture has many implications. There are economic implications, housing implications and of course there are implications for the church. I remember Phil Silver, formerly of the city of Raleigh, describing the shift in Raleigh and went on to share with business leaders and community leaders that the result will be a continual growth in places like North Hills and other multi-use sites in our city. If we look around we see a real estate shift as well as a desire by many to rent and not own, be in high-density areas and build community not so much around family as much as around social gatherings, hobbies and other interests. Interestingly, Raleigh is still one of the lowest metropolitan areas in regards to single adults however it is still 48%.

This shift has an enormous effect on the church, especially one like ours. We exist in the middle of one of the more highly density of single adults in Raleigh and yet, our congregation only has about 15% of single adults in our membership. There is something wrong with that figure and

it is something we must address as we move forward.

Today, I am speaking to you as we come to the end of our series on the topic of "One is a Whole Number." We have already spoken about marriage and the physical (sexual) relationship within marriage. Now we turn our attention to the Biblical view of singleness.

Let me say, before we begin, that what I am going to share with you today is Biblical interpretation and not personal experience. I have never really been single. I lived at home when I went to college. My first apartment was when Robin and I were married and we moved in together. I was there two weeks by myself before the wedding, but I am pretty sure that does not count as being single. Many of you might have my experience and you have been married your whole adult life. Some of you might say it just feels that way. Others of you have been single for most of your life and you might be single now. Some of you are single for the first time in your adult life. You never imagined you would be single. A divorce or the death of your spouse has left you in a place you did not imagine yourself to be.

Here is what I want to say as we begin. This sermon is really for all of us. Whether we are single or not, we can learn from each other and for each other. If you are a married adult, I want to say something difficult for all of us to hear and that is half of us will at one point in our lives be single again or single for the first time with the passing of our spouse. Singleness is an important topic for all of us and for the church as a whole.

When we read Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 7 we can almost become confused about exactly what Paul is trying to say. He goes from those who are married to those who are married to unbelievers, to those who are single, to those who are widowed, to those who are slaves, to those who are circumcised and uncircumcised to those who are engaged. Paul moves back and forth from this is from the Lord to this is my thinking in regards to this subject. In other words, in some of these cases Paul says



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I do not have a word from the Lord. That is Jesus did not address this, but as a pastor and one with the Spirit of the Lord here is my instruction. In true Pauline fashion he covers the gamut of relationships within culture and the church. All of these topics are not the central teaching in 1 Corinthians, but rather are examples of how to live in what Paul describes as a time of crisis.

What was happening in the church in Corinth and in the Corinthian culture that would cause Paul to write these instructions? The church at Corinth was a church of Jews and Gentiles living in a very immoral culture. The immorality in Corinth was rampant and the church had to discover what it meant to follow Jesus as a minority in this culture that was becoming more and more suspicious and hostile toward them. In response to the immorality of the culture some in the church believed that the right response to Christ was to live an ascetic and celibate life in and outside marriage.

Notice how this passage begins “Now for the matters you wrote about, a man should not marry a woman.” Paul is responding to questions the Corinthian church had in regards to certain ways to live. One was in regards to marriage and even celibacy in marriage. It is interesting that the Greek here does not say, “Should not marry a woman.” The Greek actually says, “Should a man not touch a woman.” This is one of what scholars call the Corinthian Slogans. The books of 1 and 2 Corinthians are filled with slogans meaning they are things that are being said by the church in Corinth and Paul is not stating them as a command, but rather as a place of discussion.

The point is whether there should be celibacy inside marriage as there should be outside marriage. Paul goes on to acknowledge throughout the chapter how the physical urge is great and that husbands and wives should do their duty as not to let the other fall into temptation, and also he goes on to say essentially you should remain single at this time if you can but if not, then go ahead and marry. Over and over again in regards to those who are engaged, those who are single and those who are widowed he instructs them that if they can remain celibate to remain that way and devote themselves to the work of the church, instead of marrying.

Now that is not a great commendation for marriage, and we should not be surprised that there are some in the church who for centuries have argued that Paul is saying that the gift of singleness is a greater gift than the gift of marriage. So those who are truly called to vocational ministry are also called to singleness and celibacy. However, that is not Paul's point either. Paul would liken the marriage relationship to Christ and the Church. Paul wrote these instructions because he believed that the time was short and that Jesus was coming and persecution was coming and one should simplify their lives as much as possible for the coming crisis and coming of Christ. This included marriage, which for Paul complicated life.

Paul is not saying marriage is better than singleness or that singleness is better than marriage. If you don't hear anything else this morning hear this: Both singleness and marriage is a gift from God and should be received as such in our lives.

As we look at this text I want us to consider four things that singleness can teach us. I want us to consider how those who are single in our congregation and in our lives offer us examples that we all need to practice.

The first one is discipline. We are told over and over again to discipline our lives for the sake of Christ. Paul would say that he buffeted or beat his body as a way of bringing it into discipline. He fought urges and temptations. Here Paul reminds us that there are powerful urges and passions we all have as human beings. He tells those who are unmarried and widows if you can control yourself it is better to be single, now remember the setting, but if you cannot to get married. The larger point here is that in regards to our physical nature discipline is required.

Paul has already addressed how those who are married are to discipline themselves within the marriage covenant. Now he addresses those who are single in regards to celibacy. Can we all just admit today that what we are talking about is of great importance and difficult for many of our friends and family members. The call to celibacy outside marriage requires great discipline for many and that act of discipline is a lesson for us all.

When we observe those we love and share life with practice this discipline in their lives, it is a reminder that we do have choices in regards to our own temptations. It is as though Paul is reminding us that we do have the power to discipline our lives and make choices that please God regardless of what the temptation might be.

No one really likes discipline, but we know it is the best for us. There is the story of a mom who despised disciplining her son who sent him to school with this note. “Dear Teacher, in regards to little Archibald he sometimes can be naughty, so if he acts up feel free to spank the little boy next to him so he will get the message.”

We like discipline, as long as it is someone else. Paul urges discipline for those who are single and follow Christ. This is a lesson that single adults can teach us.

A second gift single adults can give us is contentment. If you notice here in this passage, essentially Paul says be content in whatever situation you find yourself in. Paul essentially says to those in Corinth, if your married stay married even if it is with an unbeliever. If you are single stay single. If you are circumcised stay that way, uncircumcised stay that way. If you are engaged don't mistreat the woman you are engaged too. If she still wants to marry go ahead but if not, that is okay too. He goes as far as saying, if you are a slave be content in that situation, but if you can gain your freedom that is good

too, but don't worry about it if not.

Remember, Paul is writing at a time when he is certain that Jesus is returning and persecution is coming and he is essentially saying these concerns are not as important as getting on with serving Christ.

Now we would not go as far as Paul today in our advice regarding these situations, but the spirit is still something to consider. Paul is encouraging us to put Christ first and be content with our current situation knowing God is working.

If I were going to interpret this for us today, I would say Paul is saying we don't have to wait to serve Christ. God is at work, Christ is coming, the Kingdom of God is at hand so what are we waiting for. If we are married we don't need to wait until we get our marriage perfect, like that is going to happen, get on with serving Christ together.

If you are widowed or divorced, you don't have to wait to find someone else before you serve Christ. If you are engaged, you don't have to wait to be married before you begin to serve Christ. Wherever you find yourself, right now is the place where we begin to serve Christ. We learn contentment as we are and we serve Christ as we are.

One author described single adults in three categories. One was young and restless. This is the single adult, who is a younger adult, and has never married and feels the pressure to find a spouse. For if they do not they are somehow going to miss out on life and worse, be outside the will of God for their lives. First of all, remember that singleness is seen as a gift just like marriage. The point Paul is making is that you are full and complete and whole in and of yourself and God has a plan for your life as you are. Be content with who you are now and serve Christ.

The second group was Sleepless in Seattle. Meant for the median adult who is single for whatever reason. It might be that you were once married but now are not, whether by your choice or the choice of another. You are wondering about what the future holds. You have known life as a married person and now as a single adult. What are you to do now? Paul would say be content as life is now. It might change, but don't wait to serve Christ.

The third group was home alone. This group was those who might have experienced singleness a long time or

maybe the person who has become a recent widow or widower. What does life hold for you now? It is true life is different. Friendships are different. Church is different. Work can be different. Paul would say be content in this moment and serve Christ.

My mom was widowed at 45 after 25 years of marriage. When she was in her 40s and 50 she would from time-to-time go out to eat with a gentleman or two, but it never really amounted to much. At her funeral the Pastor who she served with at the church for 20 or more years told stories of how men would come around the office from time-to-time saying they were there for one thing, but he knew they were there to see my mom and gauge her interest in them. Then one day, when my Mom was in her 60's she asked if she could have an appointment with her Pastor, who was also her boss. He said you don't need an appointment. She said, no, I want an appointment. She met with our pastor and told him that she did not want to marry again. She said, is that okay? Is it okay that I don't really want to marry or date again? He then looked at her and said Dot, of course it is okay. Are you still in love with a man named Glenn? She said yes, yes I am.

There were times when I wished my Mom had married again or met someone to spend time with. However, I watched her make those changes of life and find contentment in her place in the life of the church and community. Contentment is something we all need to learn and I think our single adults have a great gift to show us.

The third quality we find is community. There is no indication that the single adult here in this passage is any less a part of the community of faith. In fact, we might be able to argue that they are more part of the community. Single adults not only need community, they actually show us how to intentionally build community. As I stated, one of the great social and cultural shifts is that people are choosing singleness and building community in many places outside the traditional family. The rise in hobbies, sport participation and other interests is on a rise. You can find a group to do about anything you want to do. You want to run a marathon; meet and run with others at the park. You want to learn to paint; you can find group painting and cooking lessons. You want to learn; there are book clubs and clubs around about every topic and interest. Sad to say the church is not, right now, where singles are turning for community. That is not good and something we must address.

The point is simply, that although it is true that married

IF YOU ARE WIDOWED OR DIVORCED, YOU DON'T HAVE TO WAIT TO FIND SOMEONE ELSE BEFORE YOU SERVE CHRIST. IF YOU ARE ENGAGED, YOU DON'T HAVE TO WAIT TO BE MARRIED BEFORE YOU BEGIN TO SERVE CHRIST. WHEREVER YOU FIND YOURSELF, RIGHT NOW IS THE PLACE WHERE WE BEGIN TO SERVE CHRIST. WE LEARN CONTENTMENT AS WE ARE AND WE SERVE CHRIST AS WE ARE.