

THEME: Love, Sex, and Marriage
“Single, Not Alone”

Sermon preached by Kallie Green

January 19-20, 2013 at First United Methodist Church – Durango

1 Corinthians 7:25-35

Now regarding your question about the young women who are not yet married. I do not have a command from the Lord for them. But the Lord in his mercy has given me wisdom that can be trusted, and I will share it with you. Because of the present crisis, I think it is best to remain as you are. If you have a wife, do not seek to end the marriage. If you do not have a wife, do not seek to get married. But if you do get married, it is not a sin. And if a young woman gets married, it is not a sin. However, those who get married at this time will have troubles, and I am trying to spare you those problems.*

I want you to be free from the concerns of this life. An unmarried man can spend his time doing the Lord's work and thinking how to please him. But a married man has to think about his earthly responsibilities and how to please his wife. His interests are divided. In the same way, a woman who is no longer married or has never been married can be devoted to the Lord and holy in body and in spirit. But a married woman has to think about her earthly responsibilities and how to please her husband. I am saying this for your benefit, not to place restrictions on you. I want you to do whatever will help you serve the Lord best, with as few distractions as possible.

Good Morning!

Pastor Jeff has been doing a sermon series on Love, Sex, and Marriage, and while it is interesting to listen as a single person, and there are certainly a number of things that I have learned, today I want to talk about being single as a Christian. The first thing I want mention is that being single, can mean a lot of things. We had about 60 people respond to the surveys who were single. They were single either because they had always been single, were divorced, or widowed. There was a wide age range from high school age to almost 80. The situations varied. Some have never been in serious relationships; some have young or grown kids. I really appreciate everyone who took the time to fill out the survey as it really helped me see where people are and what they are dealing with. I have been

single through all of college, and so I realize that my perspective is a little different from someone in some of these other situations. But there were some clear issues that no matter the age bracket or category, we all struggle with to some extent. Now I realize that many of you are not single but you know single people and maybe even have single children so I hope some of what we share today will be helpful in terms of changing how you view being single. Also, as we look at what single people are looking for in a mate and relationship, you might see how you can be a better companion or helper to your mate or partner. You have message notes and meditations and I encourage you to write down anything that you want to remember. And I hope that the scripture and meditations might be a blessing to you this week.

One of the board games I grew up with was the game of LIFE.

SLIDE “The Game of LIFE”

In it, you get to choose your car color, whether or not you go to college and then pick a job from a stack of cards. After that you begin a journey that supposedly outlines all the obstacles of life.

SLIDE PICTURE: “Get Married”

The first step is to get to choose a spouse, the next is a house. It is very neat and orderly. You never get divorced, your spouse never dies or leaves, and you never argue. Though I did sometimes make my spouse sit in the back of the car with the kids.

But what happens when this doesn't happen? Jennifer Marshall wrote a book called Now and Not Yet for women (many of whom she surveyed) who assumed as teenagers that they would be married by 25, but for whom that didn't happen. She spoke to and of women who have entered the workforce, but are still hoping that one day they can marry and raise kids. They felt stuck in a holding pattern. I think this is more, though not uniquely, of a conscious issue for women, as we are raised and hardwired, to think about having kids. And there is a realization, that the years we can do that are limited.

Now the majority of single men and women who took the survey we put out, had hopes of one day getting married or remarried, but certainly not all of them. But I think most single people whether or not they want to get married can agree on the pressure to find a mate and even sometimes frustration. Churches, restaurants, vacation packages, advertisements, and friends all tell us that we are missing something, sometimes even with a hint of pity, because we are “alone.” I will tell you right now, that I do not think being single means that we need to be or are alone.

We usually look to Genesis or some of the writings of Paul the apostle to talk about how man and woman were meant to be together. And I am not going to refute that marriage can be all the wonderful things we say it is, but it is also something that takes a lot of work, and a relationship that requires sacrifice on both parts to make it work.

It is easy to paint this picture of a white picket fence that guards the perfect family in their house. And the grass can be really green behind that fence. We would always have someone to do stuff with, we would never be lonely, we would always feel complete and happy.right? Is that really the only way to feel complete and happy?

We have been hearing what the Bible says about being married, but what does the Bible say about being single? In today’s scripture reading we see that marriage isn’t the only option for a purposeful life. That in fact being single can be a very holy option for one’s life.

There are a number of very well-known people in the Bible that were single, at the top of the list is Jesus. But there were many others that were likely single like Mary and Martha, and some of the disciples. Another person is Paul the apostle, the author of today’s scripture that we read.

Paul compares being single to being married in this passage. He notes that married people have their attention divided between their spouse and the Lord, whereas, single people have greater opportunity to focus on God.

This is still a relevant observation today. But it is worth noting that having ones full attention on God as Paul talked about it isn’t something that automatically happens. I don’t think the partying college bachelor stereotype is what Paul was going for. Corinthians is a letter that he wrote to the Church of Corinth in response to earlier correspondence. It is clear from the things he

addresses that there is a lot of conflict about how they should act and what they should be doing. They were having issues with sexual immorality. We didn't read it today, but Paul is writing in response to a question if members should be celibate. Paul's response to whether or not they should be celibate, whether they should be single or married, is pretty simple. He tells them "stay as you are."

SLIDE SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 7:26

Now he does qualify this with some other things that I want to talk about. But there is something very important in this, and that is staying in the present. It is so easy to think of being single as a waiting period, and many people do. Even letting that affect if they should push themselves in the workforce, or moving to maybe meet new people. I think Paul is pointing out, that instead of wondering about the future, look at where you are now, and how that enables you to serve. Paul spent his entire life single, and many people still do that today. As a single or married person it is so easy to forget that our lives are now, not in x amount of years when graduation comes, not when that promotion finally happens, not when that perfect person walks into our lives, not when retirement finally comes, but, today.

It is clear that Paul realizes this because he is focused on the present when he justifies his answer with reference to what he calls "the present crisis." Paul travelled all over the place visiting and starting new Christian communities. He would spend the last years of his life under house arrest.

He tells them to not go get a divorce, but that if they are single, they have the chance to be free of concern. Paul is known for his joyful and hopeful demeanor in prison. But I suspect he realizes that even for him this is not an ideal situation to be worried about a family.

Now, free from concern does not mean easy. Paul was a missionary, which I would like to point out is not an option the game of LIFE offers, because the goal there is to end up with the most money (which hopefully as Christians we realize isn't the actual goal).

One of the comments on the survey was that this person was tired of being told or having it implied that they were missing out on their higher calling. And unless you want to argue that Jesus missed out on his calling,

or Paul, or any of the other single people in the Bible, I would argue that that is certainly not the case. We all have our own individual callings as Christians, that may or may not include being single.

There were some other responses from the surveys that I loved. One of the questions we asked was what is your biggest struggle being single and one person wrote that their biggest struggle was discovering how much they enjoyed it.

Now, we are not in a crisis like Paul was. And there are certainly things to enjoy. We are blessed to live in a place where beyond the occasional awkward encounter, we are not persecuted the way Christians were in Paul's time, and even Christians in other places in our world today. Marriage is certainly an option, and Paul even writes, that if you are falling for someone you are better off committing to that person.

And this brings us to the fact that stay as you are doesn't always feel like a choice, to some it may seem like more of a problem. And I wish I could give you the perfect advice on finding someone that you wanted to spend the rest of your life with. Someone that can be the helper and companion we read about in Genesis. But you would probably be better off asking some of the married people around....

However there are a few observations I want to share. In preparing this sermon I have read some different books, had some interesting conversations, and read the survey responses and I have made a few observations.

There are some good things and some not so good things to do when it comes to serious relationships. Some of the responses from divorced individuals who filled out the surveys were gut wrenching. There had been abuse in so many forms. The advice I heard from that was not to ignore red flags early on, because they don't just go away by ignoring them. The other side to that was being clear on who you are and what your faith is, before rushing into a relationship.

Some of the good things to do involved balancing time you spend together. Balance the time spent dating with the time spent on the rest of your life and your faith life. There are a lot of people that are struggling to keep up with things even without dating, and my advice to them is do what you need to do to lighten that burden. You can run for so long, but set a day, or even just a time, to rest, to stop. It's easy to forget to do this, especially when you feel like you are on your own. But being on your own is even more reason to take care of ourselves. But

the biggest thing to work on was communication. Communicate emotions, expectations, hopes, dislikes, beliefs---because that is what leads to working relationships. We live in a culture where there are not a lot of standards when it comes to dating, hooking up, going out, courting, whatever you want to call it. There are certainly a lot of opinions on when it is ok to do certain things and on who is supposed to ask who out, but this is where communication becomes very important.

One of my favorite jokes is about a man who continually prays to God. Please let me win the lottery my family is sick and I am in debt, please help me. This goes on for weeks. But nothing happens. The man gets more desperate and prays even more. Finally God speaks to him, he says “work with me..... buy a lottery ticket.” Now I’m not saying God is going to make you win the lottery if you buy a ticket. But I am saying that sometimes we assume things are just going to happen, that God is just going to fix things. Sometimes he does, but often we have to be ready and willing to do a little of the work ourselves. Going to God for everything is important, but then listen for what needs to be done when it is time. And sometimes it isn’t time, and that’s ok too.

There are certainly options out there for those who want to marry. About 40% of the singles who took the survey have tried online dating. There are books that can help someone decide what to look for and how, and some have found that really helpful. I really can’t speak to these things. But I can tell you what single people responded on the survey as being the top characteristics they were looking for.

The question asked was “which attributes do you desire in a potential mate.”

SLIDE MEN under 50

For men under 50, the number one was tied between honest/trustworthy and humorous/fun. The remaining slots for the top five were tied by the following: strong faith, intelligent, emotionally stable, physically attractive, compassionate, and good communicator.

For men above 50, the following three traits were tied:

SLIDE MEN over 50

strong faith, honest/trustworthy, and physically attractive. The remaining slots were tied with romantic, intelligent, emotionally stable, humorous/fun, and good communicator.

Now for what the women desired who were under 50:

SLIDE Women: Which Attributes do you desire most...

1-honest/trustworthy, 2-strong Faith, 3-compassionate, 4-emotionally stable. For women above fifty the list was about the same except intelligent was at the top of the list.

But, overall for all ages and genders, the top response was honest/trustworthy, and the second was a strong faith.

When I look at these lists, I can't help but notice that a lot of these are things that go along with having a developed faith and a commitment to service. Whether or not you want to get married, or even if you are married, being intentional about our faith and our faith community is so important. One of the things you should realize about Paul is that he didn't go his life or mission alone as a single person. He gives us these verses in Phillipians 4:12-13.

SLIDE SCRIPTURE: Phillipians 4:12-13

"I know the experience of being in need and of having more than enough; I have learned the secret to being content in any and every circumstance, whether full or hungry or whether having plenty or being poor. I can endure all these things through the power of the one who gives me strength." He was relying on his faith, and on his brothers and sisters in Christ. He had support. At the end and beginning of the letters he writes, he is often thanking people for praying, or sending resources, or he is counting the days down until he gets to see them again. Just a few chapters after this passage on marriage and being single, he writes about the body of Christ. Which is a metaphor that describes how as Christians we all have different gifts and abilities and need to work together to be

Christ to the world and to each other. We can each offer each other support, strength, and encouragement in our own way.

Reading through the surveys there were some very inspiring responses. But there were also some that made me wish I could give these people hugs and somehow fix the brokenness. I found myself praying for the people who wrote them because it is clear there is a lot of hurting. There are a lot of people that feel very alone. And even as someone who really enjoys being single, there are still days when it is lonely. Someone described it to me as seasons of loneliness. Which I thought was an apt description. Loneliness is a very real thing, and real hurt. My advice if you are struggling with this is to find support and purpose. It is easy as a single person to wake up and think only of ourselves. But when we stay in that mindset, things quickly go downhill. Whereas when we are in community and can focus on the needs of others, it makes our own needs seem a little less immediate. But as so many people wrote in the surveys, how do you find community? How do you find people that you can connect with?

I remember my very first Sunday in Durango. I had just transferred colleges. I drove myself the 1000 miles here, and moved myself in. I walked into this sanctuary that weekend and saw everybody happy to see each other, saw all the couples and families, and I realized how very far away I was from home. I am not going to tell you that I found community instantly or easily, because that would be a lie, it took work and commitment. Jeff has talked about how sometimes love in a marriage is a choice and not a feeling, and that is true in other relationships too. It wasn't until this year, my third year in Durango, that I was actually excited to leave home after break because I wanted to be here in this community.

Part of my support comes from a group called Voyagers. There are 5 of us that meet every week. We discuss theological questions, talk about our joys and struggles, and are committed to praying for each other daily. They have walked with me in very difficult and very joyful times, and as a result I know I can trust them.

I made the choice to transfer schools and move here, but sometimes our situations are not a choice we get to make. I interviewed a friend of mine Patti, who I know through my Voyagers groups. I want you to hear what she has to say as someone in a different period of singleness.

VIDEO Patti Rancatti Interview

One of the reasons I chose to interview Patti is the grace she shows in her life by taking a very painful loss in her life, and with the help of her faith and people around her, turning that loss and her life into a blessing for so many other people.

In the game of LIFE the goal is to retire in the Millionaire Estates with the most money.

SLIDE PICTURE: Millionaire Estates

But our higher calling isn't to retire in the Millionaire Estates, it is to be Jesus Christ to the world. And for each of us that can mean different things for our lives. For Paul it meant a prison cell. It also meant being single, whereas for some it means being married. Either way there are going to be challenges along the way.

But for either way, married or single, we need support and encouragement, people to cry and to rejoice with us. The body of Christ reminds us that being a Christian isn't something we do only on our own. It is something we do in community, as we all have different gifts and strengths.

And if you are not a part of something that gives you the chance to experience that, I would encourage you to look for it. This Wednesday night Cherie Cobb and her husband are going to host an informational meeting about voyagers. And even if you can't make that time but are interested, let her, Marcia Heidenreich or myself know, as there are going to be more groups starting at different times of the week.

The widow and widowers group that Patti facilitates always welcomes more people.

In the library as well as on the website, there is information about many different groups in the church. Check that out, and ask any of the staff for more information about a specific one or just finding a group. It takes work to find a group and then to be comfortable enough to share, but once you do, it is well worth it.

And if you don't feel very comfortable with this type of group, and you think I am crazy for suggesting you sit around and discuss things, find a group that focuses on doing something like some sort of service.

The last bit of this passage I want to emphasize is when Paul writes: "I am saying this for your benefit, not to place restrictions on you. I want you to do whatever will help you serve the Lord best, with as few distractions as possible."

Our call is to be Jesus Christ to the world. There are so many different ways to do that, and if you find yourself single right now, whether or not you want to get married someday in the future, give thanks for the opportunities it allows you. I leave my house in the morning and often don't come home until late at night, but I can do that because I don't have to worry about people waiting on me. Instead of wondering what the future holds, focus on the joys of life right now, because they are there no matter how dark it seems. And if you can't see that, find people who can help you find that light. Also focus on Christ and the many people around us every day that he asked us to care for.

I will leave you with this image. When you are looking only at your feet, it is easy to be tripped up and run into things. But when you look around you at the many people our lives affect, and you look ahead at Christ, the other stuff is far less likely to cause us to stumble. When I look at Patti I know she is doing this because she is always looking around at the needs around her, constantly asking where God wants her, instead of wondering where she wants to be. That is what Paul meant when he talked about having our undivided attention on God.

Will you pray with me?

“Single, Not Alone”

Theme: Love, Sex, and Marriage

1 Corinthians 7:25-28, 32-35

Things I'd like to remember from today's sermon:

Meditation Moments

Monday, January 21 – Read Matthew 6:27-34 This passage is a poetic argument against worrying by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount. He compares the helplessness and short lived lives of plants and small animals to the lives of people who are constantly worried about what they want instead of being concerned about the kingdom of God.

- “Who among you, by worrying, can add a single moment to their life?” What does worrying achieve? What is the difference between worrying about something and doing something about it? When is it OK to let things go and stop worrying? How much time do you spend worrying about things that you have little to no control over?
- “Instead desire first and foremost God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, stop worrying about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself.” By focusing on God’s will, the importance of other desires tends to fade. What does it look like to desire God’s kingdom and righteousness?

Tuesday, January 22– Read Romans 12:9-15 Paul called the “church family” in Rome to “love each other like the members of your family.” Families are meant to stick together through all of life’s challenges and stages, not just when it is easy.

- An important aspect of relationships is sharing both joys and struggles. What is the significance and what does it look like to “be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying”?
- In The Message, verse 12 reads, “Don’t quit in hard times; pray all the harder.” When do you most often turn to God in prayer? Have you made it a habit to turn to God during hard times?

Wednesday, January 23– Read Lamentations 3:19-41 Lamentations is a heart-broken reflection, in Hebrew poetry, over the death and destruction that took place in Jerusalem when the Babylonian army overran the city in 586 B.C.E. Amidst the rubble, ashes and dead bodies, Jeremiah sounded two themes: God’s covenant love and faithfulness, and the need on our part for honest self-examination and returning to God.

- At times of suffering, our pain can turn us against God, thinking that if there is a God, that God must be cruel and callous. Jeremiah honored his pain (verses 19-20), but clung to trust in God (verses 22- 24, 31-33). Is there any basis other than wishful thinking for trusting God when we’re in pain? What helps you to keep trusting God?
- Verse 26 said, “It’s good to wait in silence for the LORD’s deliverance.” It was a patient, listening silence. It led Jeremiah to verse 41’s call: “We must search and examine our ways; we must return to the LORD.”

How can searching and examining our ways make our hearts ready for the paths to deliverance God wants to open for us?

Thursday, January 24– Mark 10:46-52 If there was ever a person we might think would have greeted people with words like, “I know just what you need,” it would have been Jesus. But in his wisdom, he realized that, in most cases, we have to sense our need to open the channels through which his healing power can flow. So he asked even this blind man, “What do you want me to do for you?”

- In a world without Braille, with no established support services, a blind man had no choice but to beg. When have you found yourself at your wits end, feeling helpless, out of options? Imagine Jesus standing before you asking, “What do you want me to do for you?” What will you tell Jesus you want him to do? What is your greatest need?
- Scholar Craig Keener notes that “The disciples want to get on with the business of setting up the kingdom ... not understanding that stopping for a blind beggar is the sort of thing Jesus’ kingdom is all about.” In what ways can we get so busy pursuing our “successful” lives that we become more like the disciples than like Jesus?

Friday, January 25– Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 In this reading, the apostle Paul talks about asking God for relief from “a thorn in my body.” (No one knows for sure what the “thorn” was. Some have hypothesized that it might have been damaged eyesight—see Galatians 6:11.) Paul did not get the physical relief he asked for, but he received an even more precious kind of healing—the assurance that God’s grace was enough, and that when he was weak, then Christ’s power made him strong.

- Paul thought he knew what he needed. The answer didn’t match his request, yet he trusted God enough to accept it and live in peace with God’s gift. When have you faced the painful loss of something you really wanted? Has God’s grace been enough for you?
- Paul called his “thorn,” whatever it was, “a messenger from Satan,” a bad thing. Still, he said, he could see that it served a good purpose in his growth—“so that I wouldn’t be conceited,” and “so that Christ’s power can rest on me.” In what ways have you seen God’s power bend even hurtful or evil things to serve a good purpose?

Saturday, January 26– Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-11 We may most often hear this passage from the wisdom book of Ecclesiastes read at funerals. But far from focusing on life’s end, these verses actually reflect on the full range of “seasons” our lives go through. We deal best with all of life’s seasons, they suggest, when we do so in the light of the “eternity” God has placed in our hearts.

- How many of the poetic phrases in today’s passage can you connect to some season in your life and even meaningful relationships? What are some of the “times” listed that suggest that these “seasons” are not always what God would wish to have happen, but are just “part of the deal” that comes with living in this world?
- You may know Ecclesiastes’ well-known opening words from the King James Version: “Vanity, vanity—all is vanity.” How could the reality of life’s seasons lead us to despair if God had not placed “eternity” (trust that in the end life has God-given purpose) in our hearts? In what ways can hope for eternity add meaning to mundane daily routines?