

SINGLENES: PAIN AND OPPORTUNITY

Matthew 19:12; 1 Corinthians 7:7-8; 12:4-7

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Our topic tonight is singleness. And I'm deeply aware that this is a highly sensitive, very personal, very painful topic for many of us this evening. That's actually one of the reasons Dan and I have chosen to include this in our sermon series on marriage, sex, and sexuality. This is such a pressing issue for our church community that we can't ignore it. And what I want us to do this evening is to bring our pain into the Lord's presence, and hear from him and allow him to help us. But because what I'm about to say is fraught with emotion, I want to say two quick preliminaries before we dive in.

First, the teaching of Scripture, and the common witness of the church throughout the centuries, is that when the Scriptures are preached faithfully, we hear God's voice. At one level, the words are the preacher's. But at a deeper level, God is speaking through the preacher. For Dan and me, that means each week we have a huge responsibility. And we take it seriously. We're not infallible. But one of the hidden aspects of our work, and one of the hardest aspects of our work, is how long we take prayerfully wrestling with Scripture so that we proclaim it faithfully. For all of us that means when we come to a sermon our attitude should be one of prayerfully listening for the voice of the Lord. Sometimes what God says will be refreshing and joyful for us. Other times it will be painful. But the posture God delights in is one of humbly, prayerfully asking God to speak to us and let us hear his voice. I know that some of you are dreading this sermon on this topic. But the Lord has something he wants to say to you tonight. May I encourage you to ask the Lord to speak to *you*?

Second, the other hidden aspect of a pastor's calling is prayer. At the heart of pastoral ministry is a calling to pray for the family of God. I love the definition given by Michael Ramsey, the Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1960s. He described a pastor's praying as "Coming before God with the people on your heart." Well, as we begin, I want to assure you that's what I've been doing. I'm speaking this evening out of a deep love for you, and out of time spent before God with you on my heart.

That said, let's pray.

Wendell Berry's novel, *Jayber Crow*¹ is the fictional memoir of Jayber Crow, barber of Port William. Because of his circumstances, he remains single into old age. It's an incredibly poignant story. Central to the plot is his unrequited love for Mattie Chatham. Fairly early in the novel the young Mattie makes a foolish marriage to an arrogant, callous husband which she endures with great dignity and love. Jayber determines to honour her wedding vow. His love for her lasts for 40 years, but it remains his secret.

Near the end of the book, he describes a piece of woodland where he and Mattie would both go. They never go together. They never go with the intention of meeting each other. But on occasions they're there at the same time. He describes their encounters like this:

Mattie always preserved a certain discretion, not in anything she said, but in the way she was, the way she carried herself and looked. She was with me, but not for

¹ Berkley, CA: Counterpoint, 2000.

me, if you can see what I mean. There was a veil between us. We both kept her vow, as I alone kept mine. I knew there was a smile of hers that I had never seen. And that was well. That was all right.”²

This chaste friendship lasts right up to the almost unbearably moving final sentence of the book.

But although there’s sadness and loneliness running through the story, Jayber Crow is bigger than his singleness. He’s bigger than his unrequited love for Mattie Chatham. There are other griefs he must endure: being an orphan, the death of friends, the gradual decline and decay of the town he calls home. But there are good things too. His life is a good life. He has a real, rich community he belongs to. He has a place within that community. He’s loved and needed. He has good friends. He’s the recipient and giver of generosity. The giver and receiver of hospitality. He is fully present. He belongs. Above all, he has a deep integrity and character. He is a virtuous man. A man who is far bigger, far more wonderful than simply his marital status.

Strikingly, the only truly tragic characters in the book are all married. They’re married and yet trapped in a sense of dissatisfaction, trapped by who they want to be but can’t be. Trapped by longing to escape from their circumstances and themselves. And so although they’re married — one of them to an incredible woman—they’re utterly miserable. And utterly alone.

If you want to form a moral imagination about singleness, marriage, community, loyalty, and integrity, and friendship, I don’t think you can do better than this book.

Last week Dan preached on marriage, and laid out a framework for thinking about these things. He pointed out that human marriage is just a shadow and foretaste of something far greater—the future marriage feast of Christ and his church. So that, in the largest and most important sense of the word all of us—single, married, widowed, divorced, gay, straight—are invited to be married, permanently, to Christ. And in the meantime, the purpose of temporary human marriage is not personal fulfillment, but serving God and loving others. I commend the sermon to you; if you’ve not heard it you can listen to it online.

This week, as we think about singleness we have two headings: (1) The Pain of Singleness; (2) The Opportunity of Singleness. We need to consider both.

1. The Pain of Singleness

Let’s look for a moment at Jesus’ words in Matthew 19:12. Our normal style of preaching here at Rez is to take one passage and work through it together, seeing its implications for today. Tonight is going to be different. I’m going to be a little more topical in approach, looking at a few Bible verses along the way.

[Mt 19:12]. As we saw last week, while teaching his disciples about marriage and divorce, Jesus gives three reasons why men became eunuchs in his day. They also apply more broadly to why people in every age don’t get married. For some Christians, singleness is a choice. (They make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven.) They sense God’s calling on their lives, they realize they have the ability to remain single rather than to marry, and they choose to do so for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

² Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 350-1.

But for many more single Christians, they don't choose singleness. Singleness chooses them, if you will. There may be biological factors, or circumstantial factors—other people's choices, economic forces, cultural factors. But, for reasons beyond their control, they remain single. Sometimes that's for a period of time: a few years. Sometimes it ends up being for life. And obviously these circumstantial issues are a huge issue for us. There are the demographics of DC to deal with. And, within that, we're a small church, which makes dating a goldfish bowl. And we have many more single women than single men.

And of course, the experience of singleness varies depending on a lot of other factors. The experience of someone widowed after 50 years of marriage is very different from the experience of a single man aged 22 who isn't even thinking of marriage yet. And the experience of a woman in her mid-20s is different from a woman in her late 30s. Most people in their mid-20s probably still expect they'll get married sometime. By their late 30s, most people—men and women—are fearing that they'll never marry. And, for women, perhaps surrounded by friends with children there's an added grief: the growing possibility that even if they marry, they'll not be able to have children.

And so even in our own little community I'm conscious of a whole variety of experiences and responses to being single. It's such a personal thing that evokes all kinds of fears, disappointments, frustrations, loneliness, longing, grief. What is God doing? Why me? Will I always be single?

Proverbs tells us that hope deferred makes the heart sick (Prov. 13:12). And I know that for some of you marriage and a family is something you've been looking forward to since childhood. And I want to affirm—it's a good longing. A longing for a good thing. It's why it's so weighty, so grievous when that longing is deferred.

My sense is that the pain and grief of singleness is a particular issue for the single women in our church. But I want to flag up, this is a hard issue, a painful issue, a confusing issue for single women *and* for single men. I think it feels different for the women than for the men. But it's real for both.

And the first thing I want to say is that the Lord Jesus cares. He is a Good Shepherd, wise and tender. Throughout his earthly life, he experienced the trials of a single life. He knows your grief and pain and he loves you.

The second thing I want to say is that Dan and I care too. I've heard several times second or third hand, with no names attached, that some of you feel that Dan and I don't understand the sensitivities of single women in our congregation. But that's just not true. Both Dan and I understand and care. Let me speak personally for a moment. I understand that I'm a man, that I married young, that I have a family. But my sister is a 36 year-old single mom. My mother was widowed in her 50s; she's been alone now for 12 years. One of my dearest friends is a single woman who is almost forty. My best friend in England is in his mid-30s. We Skype each other every two weeks. He is a wonderful, godly Christian man who is sexually attracted to men. He knows that he'll never be married. His nephew and niece adore him. He's godfather to everyone's kids. But he knows he'll never have a family of his own.

I have feelings. I have an imagination. And I love you. Single women and single men. I know I don't understand this issue from the inside as so many of you do. I know this isn't confronting me all the time, during the daytime, and in my dreams, and as I lie awake at night. But I do understand. And I grieve over it.

And I want to say again what I said at the beginning. At the heart of my understanding of the calling of a pastor is prayer. Coming to God with *you* on my heart. Not with you and your heartaches safely at arm's length from me. But you and your heartaches—your names and your faces—on my heart in the presence of God.

Singleness, and the pain of singleness is hard to talk about in a sermon—it's a pretty blunt instrument, and we're all in different places. It's often easier in person, 1-1. Dan and I are available to listen and to pray.

But it's not just Dan and me. This is a calling for all of us as a congregation. A calling for all of us to love one another, to bear one another's burdens. A calling for all of us—married and single—to come before God with one another on our hearts.

Single men, I do want to address you in particular for a moment. I was including you in everything I said just now. I'm not blaming you for the situation we're in. And I'm not rebuking you. But you do have an extra responsibility. It comes with being a man. We men have a collective responsibility, and you have a particular responsibility, in the way you behave and in your attitudes, to love and cherish the single women in our church. Being a man means having a particular responsibility to show great consideration and respect to the feelings of the women in our church. To bend over backwards show sensitivity to the consequences of your actions and your words. To communicate carefully and thoughtfully. I'm not trying to suck the fun out of dating. But being a man means where necessary putting ourselves at a disadvantage, and sacrificing our own interests for the sake of the women of our church. Please will you bring this to the Lord and ask him how you can do it.

But let me also say, single women, you have a responsibility too. Let me exhort you to be very careful how you speak with one another. It's right that you share your grief and pain together. It's right that you cry and grieve. It's right that you pray for one another and long for God to hear your prayers and grant you husbands. But in this struggle and suffering, please be careful how you speak. Be careful how you speak about the men of our church. Be careful how you speak of friends who are married and having children. Be careful how you speak of God. Be careful that your words build one another up rather than encouraging bitterness with God and division in our community. Again, please hear me right. I'm not rebuking you. I'm simply flagging a possible danger. I'm asking that you don't use your suffering as an opportunity for sinful patterns and practices.

The pain and grief of singleness is real. At times it's overwhelming. But if we're going to have a balanced biblical perspective, it can't be all we talk about. So, secondly, I want us to think for a few minutes about the opportunity of singleness.

2. The Opportunity of Singleness

In our Christian culture, we tend to think of marriage as *the* norm. We assume everyone will marry. And we think that something's badly wrong if someone isn't married. We also tend to think of marriage as God's cure for loneliness. But last week, Dan helped us see from Genesis 1-2 that's not what marriage is for. The purpose of marriage is that husband and wife serve God together. And, in fact, since Jesus' life and death and resurrection, there isn't *one* norm for life in this world. There are two norms. There's *marriage* for the sake of serving God. And there's *singleness* for the sake of serving God. That's what Jesus says in Matt 19:12—some have made themselves eunuch's *for the sake of the kingdom of heaven*.

And it's important where we place the accent. We tend to accent it like this: someone is either **married**, or they are **single**. But God accents it differently. He says there's marriage **for the sake of the kingdom**, and there's singleness **for the sake of the kingdom**. The fundamental, and most important thing is serving God and his kingdom.

Let's take a look briefly at what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7 [vv.7-8] Very striking words. Paul, who is single, says he wishes that everyone were like him. It's not that he thinks marriage is bad, or singleness is inherently better. Both marriage and singleness are gifts from God. But he does regard singleness as a good gift. We're familiar with Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts in chapter 12. But isn't it striking? The first specific gift he mentions in 1 Corinthians is the gift of singleness. And I don't think he's talking here about a supernatural gift of singleness in the sense that only a few single people actually have the *gift* of singleness, whereas most single people really would like to be married. Rather, he's talking about the state of life of being single. How do you know God has given you the gift of marriage? Because you're married. How do you know that, at the moment, God has given you the gift of singleness? Because at the moment you're single. This may be a life long thing. It may just be for a few years. It may change. We can be certain that about 50% of the married people in this room will one day be given the gift of singleness again, when their spouse dies. If you're single, he may one day give you the gift of marriage. For many of us, we pray and long that he does.

But let's just press pause for a moment. Given all I've said about the grief of singleness, isn't it incredibly callous for Paul to describe it as a gift? Surely it would be more accurate to talk of the curse of singleness? To understand what Paul means, let's turn briefly to chapter 12. [Read vv. 4&7] According to Paul, God doesn't give us gifts for our own good. He gives us gifts for the sake of others. He gives us gifts so that we can serve the common good. He gives us gifts to equip us to love and serve one another.

If you are married, your marriage, your family, your home is God's gift to the whole church. It's his gift to you so that you can serve us—young and old, married and single. If you are single—whether through choice or through painful circumstance—this also is God's gift so that you can serve and love the body of Christ.

I think I have a bit of advantage here as a cultural outsider. In the UK, our churches are less healthy than American churches in a number of ways. But here is one way we are healthier. We don't have the same obsession with the family. We value families. But we have a place for single people in the Christian life. In fact, some of our most influential Christian leaders have been single.

C.S. Lewis was single until the age of 57.

John Stott is probably the most influential Anglican in the 20th Century. A leader, a preacher, an evangelist, a strategist. He was hugely influential in the UK. But if anything he was even more influential on a global stage. He travelled to every continent, and was probably the most significant twentieth century global evangelical leader after Billy Graham. He was a prolific writer. And he was single. Without the responsibilities of a wife and family, it was his singleness that freed him to accomplish so much for the Lord.

Perhaps the most formative Christian influence on me is a man called Vaughan Roberts. He was our Rector just after we got married. He's a very faithful and hardworking leader of a large church, a gifted evangelist, a conference speaker. He's written books. He spends time each week with non-Christians playing golf and cricket with them. And for the 3 years we were at his church,

he poured into my life. We met 1-1 each week. He befriended me. He mentored me. He prayed for me. He taught me. He modeled the Christian life. He was instrumental in me getting ordained. And since I left, the friendship has continued. Last summer we had lunch with him, and spent a wonderful time at his home. And just a couple of months ago, he emailed me and mentioned something I'd said to him that afternoon. It was a brief note—he just said, “I want you to know I prayed for you this morning, as I do every Thursday.” And it's not just me. There are many, many young men he cares for in this way. He can do it because he's single. He's 48, and it's not easy for him. It can be lonely. He's single by circumstance not by choice. But he's chosen to use his singleness to serve God and love people. And God uses him in ways he could never use a married man.

It's not just single men. And it's not just pastors. On Friday, one of the women in our congregation wrote to me, knowing I was about the preach on singleness. She's single and in her 30s, and I'm quoting with her permission:

We ended up talking about this last night in my triad. I cried about it last night. And I can feel really disappointed that I'm never the one chosen. I sometimes feel overlooked by the Lord and men and envious of the marrieds or those headed on that path. But I cannot shake the undeniable truth that this time has been such a tremendous gift, and one that I could not trade in...

I know I spent a good portion of my adult life being scared of being and staying single. It wasn't until about 2 years ago that I realized what a gift this time was and continues to be. I certainly hope it doesn't last forever. But my ability to pursue new friends, families, home buying, new jobs and new adventures would never have been possible if I had been married at this time in my life.

I know that everyone has their own story, and those who marry young are just as much in God's plan as my not marrying young. But I cannot imagine my life in my 20s as anything other than single. I know my life is that much richer for the families that I have been able to belong to, the places and people that I have met, the leaps of faith that I have been able to take, and the ability to be completely somewhere.

Praise God.

Most single Christians are not single because *they* choose to be. But if you are single at the moment, then at least for now, this is what *the Lord* has chosen for you. And he's giving you a choice. How will you use your singleness? Wonderfully, God *is* concerned about the longings of our hearts. It is good, and natural to long to be married. It's good and natural to ask God to give you a husband or a wife. Keep doing it! And we will join with you in doing it. *But...* God is less concerned about our marital status than about our godliness. His greatest desire for each one of us is that we use the circumstances he's given us to serve him and love others.

And as I think about this, I want to commend our whole church family, singles and marrieds. Because it seems to that's what you're doing. This is an incredible congregation to serve. Dan and I are so grateful for you all. You're so loving. You love one another well; you love us well. You are wholehearted and servant-hearted. And those of you who are single, by God's grace you have not been consumed by your grief and frustration at being single. By his grace, you work hard and serve well. Thank you.

Single men and women, let me also commend you for this: there are enormous cultural pressures on single people. There are powerful messages, powerful assumptions, huge pressures, and huge temptations sexually and in relationships to compromise your sexual purity. It is overwhelming. Those of you who are living as single people, and committed to remaining sexually pure, are swimming so hard not against a cultural *stream*, but against a *torrent*. You are heroes of the faith. I really mean that. Your courage, your integrity, your godliness are extraordinary. Our culture is such a mess sexually. It's so broken, so ugly, so tragic, so destructive. You are incredible ambassadors of the faith. You are salt and light in a way only the single lifestyle allows for. As you seek to obey Jesus in this area, you are communicating an incredibly powerful message that Jesus is more important, Jesus is better, Jesus is more beautiful than the lies our culture tells us about sex. Thank you.

Let me close with some words from an article written by another of my friends in England. Sam is single. He's attracted to men. And he describes sharing the good news of Jesus with a gay friend. His friend asked, "What could possibly be worth giving up my partner for?"

In the article Sam quotes the promises of Jesus. "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life." (Mark 10:29-30)

He calls the article "A Hundredfold." And here's how he ends it. Listen to the words of a man in his late 30s, facing a lifetime of singleness. A man who knows the griefs and trials from the inside:

However much we have to leave behind we are never left out of pocket. Whatever we give up Jesus replaces, in godly kind and greater measure. No one who leaves will fail to receive, and the returns are extraordinary—a hundredfold. What we give up for Jesus does not compare to what he gives back. If the costs are great, the rewards are even greater, even in this life. For me these include a wonderful depth of friendship God has given me with many brothers and sisters; the opportunities of singleness; the privilege of a wide-ranging ministry; and the community of a wonderful church family. But greater than any of these things is the opportunity that any complex and difficult situation presents us with: to learn the all-sufficiency of Christ—learning that fullness of life and joy is in him and his service, and nowhere else.

There is a huge amount to say on this issue, but the main point is this: the moment you think following Jesus will be a poor deal for someone, you call Jesus a liar. Discipleship is not always easy. Leaving anything cherished behind is profoundly hard. But Jesus is always worth it.³

³ Sam Allberry, "A Hundredfold," <<http://stallberry.wordpress.com/2013/01/29/a-hundredfold>>