

Singleness – One Voice

Matthew 5: 1-8; Psalms 139: 1-6

Sermon by Margaret Stoltzfus

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I have written this meditation in my mind numerous times trusting that the Spirit would bring to my attention the pieces that would be most beneficial for each of us. How well I have succeeded remains to be seen. I cannot speak for all single persons but I can share my story. Let's recall some words about singleness from Dan's sermon several weeks ago:

“A lot of us in the modern world regard marriage as something of a capstone in human experience. The ideal, we think, is to marry, have children, buy a home, and live the good life. Being married is socially acceptable. A sad consequence is that single people sometimes feel like second-class citizens, especially in the church.

It wasn't always like this. For roughly the first 1500 years of Christian history, singleness was the ideal and marriage was thought to be second-class. The ideal Christian did not marry and have children, but stayed a celibate single and (usually) went to live in a convent or monastery. Celibate singles were considered to be the best kind of Christian.

On this Sunday when we talk about marriage, I hope we recognize that marriage is not the baseline human experience. The baseline human experience is actually singleness. All of us are born into this world as single people, and even if we marry, many of us will also die as single people. In fact, 44% of American adults are single.¹ So let us remember that singleness is normal. Let us remember that the Christian church was founded by a single person. And let us remember that even though some of us might end up married for the majority of our life, others of us will be single for most or all of our life. In some ways singleness defines the human experience more than marriage does.”

My present singleness began on Christmas Day 19 years ago when Bryan, my husband of 38 years, died from complications of a lung transplant at the University of California San Diego Medical Center, half way across the country from our home in Iowa. My daughter, Ellen, and I made arrangements for the autopsy and cremation, and then flew back to Iowa for the memorial service on a cold snowy weekend in late December 1994. A few weeks after Bryan's death, his brother Robert died of prostate cancer and I left with Lois Mast's parents for Harrisonburg to attend that service. By the end of January our renters

had found another place to live, and with two of my sons I flew to CA to pack up our things and drive the car back to Iowa.

Those first few months were largely filled with tasks needing to be done--all the legal work of probating wills, changing the names on financial accounts and investments, working with medical bills and insurance companies, taking care of the acre on which our home stood, and adjusting to being alone and retired. At 62, I had taken early retirement the year before when we left for CA not knowing how long we would be gone so I was left with no spouse, no job, no family within 400 miles, and an entire life to reorient.

Being alone when you've been living with someone for 38 years can be a somewhat daunting experience. Things you've taken for granted are no longer in place. Just one example: Our garage was a standalone building next to the house and I remember how frightened I was running from the garage to the back door at night those first few months, hurriedly unlocking the door and racing inside. You see, no one was waiting to welcome me home. I laugh at myself now but it wasn't funny then. Moving from a couples world to a singles one is fraught with all sorts of traps and anxieties, although I have to say that the 2 couples who were our best friends before Bryan died have remained so even to this day, inviting me out for meals, asking me to accompany them to events, and always being supportive and affirming.

During the next few months I spent a great deal of time journaling, reading, waiting, listening for the Spirit to nudge me in an appropriate direction, trying to get my inside world and my outside world in sync. I had 25 years of elementary teaching experience in my background, I had a Masters' Degree in school administration, serving in my church and community was always part of my experience, and our 5 children were mostly off on their own. Here I was at 62 with all this time, I didn't need to work--we both had pensions and retirement accounts, my health was good, so what should I do with the rest of my life? God had big plans!

In late spring, I reached out to a newly appointed single faculty member at the college because I needed help with something which no one else was around to give, and she later invited me to work part-time supervising student teachers which I did for a year.

Another Quaker friend, knowing of my computer skills, asked me to get involved as registrar for the United Society of Friends Women International triennial gathering being held in Des Moines--and that was the beginning of a beautiful and fruitful 9 years working on the executive board of that organization as recording clerk and then as presiding clerk.

Trips to Kenya and Jamaica and the West Bank where Friends women are located were eye-opening and joyous experiences. Friendships began which are dear to my heart even today.

On my first visit to Ramallah in the West Bank I stayed with a young Christian family whose children attended the Friends school. They shared with me their heart for the people of the West Bank, and wanted to take me to meet Mr. Arafat which I of course declined because our travel group had been cautioned to avoid doing anything with political overtones. They did show me his bombed out compound. I heard their stories of shellings and Israeli tanks rumbling through the streets of their city, the shootings close by that shattered windows in their home, their frightened children who ran to hide when the noise began. God was taking me into uncharted territory, the risks were great but the rewards equally so. One of my continuing passions is learning all I can about the Israeli/Palestinian situation and supporting the Friends school in Ramallah which educates both Muslim and Christian students in the ways of peace.

Iowa Yearly Meeting called me to serve as clerk of the business sessions for a number of years during this time. I chaired a working group that wrote a sabbatical policy for our pastors, and helped to write a policy protecting the children of my meeting. These were years of fulfillment and deep satisfaction as I served the wider Christian Quaker community as well as my home town in Iowa on various boards and committees.

God certainly didn't take Bryan away so that I'd be more productive but he used that event to turn my life into a source of helpfulness and empathy for many.

I have found friendship to be an important part of my journey, especially since becoming single again. A few examples: There was the teaching colleague with whom I shared my life as our children were growing up and leaving home. She was the one who moved her family out of their home the weekend after Christmas so our family could move in when we gathered in Iowa for Bryan's memorial service since renters were living in our house at the time and we had nowhere to go.

There was the friend who offered me work that first year I was alone and feeling a bit at sea. Later another dear friend became my supporter and biggest cheerleader as I led the yearly meeting through some stormy business sessions. Friends sometimes see gifts in us that we don't recognize.

As my home became a hospitality center for visitors and friends coming to town for

committee meetings and yearly meeting sessions, I learned to relax and let folks be at home with me. Here more deep friendships were nurtured.

The 2 couples who remain close friends have been so for 40 years now. They've seen me in many situations, their love, support and counsel never falters. I count them as my dearest friends although both couples are older than I and in somewhat fragile health now. This message would not be complete without sharing some of the things I miss since rejoining the singles world. I miss the stimulation of conversations that include both men and women since each has a different perspective. Here at Berkey the Better Than A Donut class fills part of that need for me. I enjoy the varied discussions and have felt accepted as part of the group.

Another thing I miss is hugs. Willard Krabill points out in the book, SEXUALITY, GOD'S GIFT, that affirming touch is an important ingredient of intimacy. In the same book, Delores Histan Friesen writes "all of us long for the blessing of human touch and compassion. Many cannot remember the last time they were hugged." (p. 178) I'm always reminded of this when my family comes home and I get lots of those wonderful hugs, especially from my sons. I'm not saying we all have to hug each other every time we meet but once in a while would be nice!

A challenging exercise is to imagine Jesus standing face to face with you. What would his physical touch say to you? I recently tried this exercise as I was working through a book called QUESTIONS FOR JESUS. What about you? What would that touch say to you?

Eating alone is another of the negatives of singleness--at least for me. My initial feelings on this developed during my college years when I worked as a maid in Winnetka during the summer and was expected to eat in the kitchen by myself. The Ladies Lunch Bunch which meets the first Thursday of the month is a good way for Berkey women to get together with others who enjoy food and good conversation. So are fellowship meals here at the church. Interaction over meals between couples and singles is good place for stimulating conversation. When have you last deliberately kept this in mind when inviting persons for meals or fellowship in your home?

Decision making is another area where singles are somewhat at a disadvantage since we don't have that built in partner to help lay out the pros and cons or present the other side of an issue. This can be a heavy responsibility if there is no family member or close friend with whom to discuss the situation. Quakers have something called Clearness Committees to help a person with such a problem or decision. Several trusted people

are called together by the individual with the problem. He/she presents the issue to the group and the questions with which he is struggling. The members of the group ask questions for clarification; they do not give advice or try to resolve the issue. They are just a sounding board to help the one who has to make the decision face the issue clearly. Often the way becomes clear as a result of such a conversation. If not, the group may meet again.

On the other hand, as a single person I didn't need to consult anyone about whether I'd join the Friends group traveling to Kenya during the election unrest, or go to the West Bank when security was tight with checkpoints, and soldiers everywhere, or travel to Egypt with a friend. There is a freedom afforded singles to follow God's leading that may not be available to the one who is married.

As a single person in the church, where is God calling you to serve? Are you ready to walk through the doors God opens to an exciting, fulfilling life? How can your gifts benefit the Kingdom in general, and the church in particular right now?

There are also 4 things for which I'm most grateful at this time in my life--

1. First, my family who affirm and support all I do. We have shared laughter, tears, serious illness and monumental success. I am so blessed by their presence in my life. We have great times together. In fact, one of them remarked at our gathering over the holidays about how glad she was to have a family with whom she enjoyed spending time. So many of my friends, she said, find family gatherings times of great stress and anxiety.
2. I'm grateful to God for a mostly healthy body and a clear mind. Indeed, we are fearfully and wonderfully made!
3. Friends are such a delight. Living in several communities and doing considerable traveling over my lifetime means having friends all over the world. What an enriching experience this has been!
4. and last of all, but most important, I'm grateful for the security of knowing that I am Margaret, beloved child of God, and he is holding me in the palm of his hand.

May it be so for each of us.