

Singleness and the Church

Romans 8:18-28

Sermon by Denise Risser

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¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

If you're on Facebook you know how it works – you find something interesting – an article, a picture, whatever - and you share it on your wall for your friends to see. A little over a year ago I read a blog post by Christena Cleveland entitled “Singled Out: How Churches Can Embrace Unmarried Adults” that I thought was really well written, so I shared it on my Facebook wall and also emailed the link to several friends. This was also right about the time we were doing a series here at Berkey on sexuality and had a Sunday on singleness. I commented to Dan soon after that that singles in the church is such a complex issue and there is so much to say about it. Dan, being the resourceful guy that he is, slyly asked me if I would be willing to speak about it sometime. In a moment of weakness, I said yes, mostly bolstered by that blog post and lots of reading I've done over the years. So, here I am.

What's the big deal with singles in the church? Is it even a big deal? I think for singles it is. Why? Because many singles in the church feel like they don't fit in. Many churches have a strong emphasis on marriage and family, which are both good things. But that emphasis can make singles feel alienated and, often unintentionally, make singles feel like a problem to be fixed, the butt of a joke, or second-class Christians. Many churches aren't quite sure what to do with singles, especially as they get older and don't follow the “usual” route of marriage and children. So, unfortunately, many churches do very little, causing many single Christians to leave the church, or struggle to know their place.

Thankfully, I have very rarely felt this at Berkey. I've appreciated that me being single seem to be irrelevant. I've been asked to use my gifts in multiple ways and have appreciated the ways that our adult Sunday school classes are not divided by life stages.

However, I have over the years, struggled with being single, mostly because it's a status I would rather not have. And as my spiritual directors and friends that I regularly talk to can attest, it has affected my spirituality in a pretty significant way. For a long time I have struggled with feeling Not Good Enough. Being single is a large part of this for me, and I think after you have that thought planted in your mind, it's easy to see life through that lens and find many examples to support that idea. Because this has been a long-term battle for me, it often feels like this Not Good Enough identity is true. That makes it difficult to find and recognize things that tell me the opposite –that I AM good enough – even though they are there, and I can find glimpses of them if I look. I then sometimes find myself being guarded, and not living the vibrant life I would like to be living, because I believe that if I show the true me, people will discover whatever it is that's wrong with me and it will just confirm my beliefs of not being good enough. I've prayed a lot about this over the years. And then sometimes I don't, because I'm weary of it and figure God knows anyway. That makes it easy to get discouraged. It's hard to wait and have hope when it seems like I'm not hearing anything from God. Or maybe it's that I'm not hearing what I want to hear. It's easy to believe that God isn't being good to me if God isn't answering my prayers in the way I want them to be answered.

Sometimes singles get these feelings of being not good enough from what other Christians say. Singles get asked questions such as "Why is a good girl like you not married?" "Are you dating anyone right now?" "How's your love life?" or comments about "still" being single.

Or singles get quoted scripture such as Psalm 84:11 – For the LORD God is a sun and shield; he bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly. Or Isaiah 54:5 – For your Maker is your husband.

Is it appropriate for me as a single person to ask married people how their love life is? Or how a sinner like them ended up married? Are you saying I'm not walking uprightly enough to "earn" a spouse? If the maker is your husband, why are you married?

Or some even misquote scripture, saying if you want a spouse, God will provide one. It doesn't say that anywhere in the Bible, although many people – including myself at times – have been tempted to interpret Psalm 37:4, "Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart" to mean that.

Finally, singles are sometimes offered what can feel like platitudes such as "just focus on Christ", "it's not easy being married", "you are more available for ministry", "don't worry about it and it will happen" and the big one, "just be content."

Ah, contentment. I think we all struggle with contentment. It's a challenge to be satisfied with what you have when you hope for something different. And with society telling us that the Next Great Thing will make us happier and our lives better, it's pretty easy to feel discontented. Wouldn't it be great if contentment was something you achieved and then you were always there? Unfortunately, that's not the way it works. It's something we have to choose, daily, or maybe even several times a day, even if we don't really feel like it. Deciding to be content can be a challenge because it involves juggling the acknowledgement that there are so many blessings in our lives and we are trying to live our lives well – maybe in a way we didn't expect – with being honest and authentic with God about our longings and disappointments.

And what about God's will? Or our own will? When do you sit back and wait on God and when do you do something about a desire? What is too much? When are we following God's will and when are we following our own? As a Christian woman desiring a meaningful relationship, this is an interesting question for me. Most advice involves comments about getting out more such as "you can't sit around and expect a guy to land on your doorstep." I don't think I'm sitting at home waiting, but I do admit I'm at somewhat of a disadvantage: every male co-worker I have is married, there are no single men my age here at Berkey, and most other things that I'm involved in are with high school age youth or groups of women. So do I make this desire more of a

priority in my life and give up the things I enjoy doing to focus on this one desire? Is this forcing my will rather than following God's? A helpful analogy I've heard uses the example of looking for a job. Sitting around and just hoping for God to provide you a spouse is sort of like sitting around and expecting to get a job when you haven't filled out any applications. I try to trust my instincts and things that intrigue me as nudges from God that I should follow. But it can be confusing.

I'm a problem-solver. I like to be active and get things done. Tell me the steps on how to accomplish something and I'll move methodically through them to get the desired result. As much as I would like to have a formula or recipe for finding a spouse, God doesn't work that way. God is creative and doesn't use the same methods for everyone.

Being a problem-solver has made it difficult to wait and easy to give up hope. Waiting isn't easy. We live in a culture that expects immediate results. What does it look like to wait well? Surrendering our desires to God and waiting to see what God does with them is hard, at least it is for me. I should feel peace knowing that God knows my desires and I can give them to God to hold lovingly. Instead, I am continually tempted to grab them back and hold onto them tightly because I don't want to give up control, and I know how I want them to be fulfilled. I need to be reminded often to surrender my desires to God, trusting that God wants what is best for me.

God designed all of us to be in relationship and with needs for intimacy. It says it right there in Genesis 2: It is not good for man to be alone. This can be tricky for singles. Being single in a world designed for partnership can be painful. The desire to want to go through life with someone is a natural one but it's hard to find that intimacy when no one has signed up for that permanently. Granted, I share a house with my twin sister, so I'm not completely alone, and often have a ready companion to do something with. But that feels a lot like spending time with myself. I do find it challenging to find intimacy when over the years most of my significant friends have moved away, and it's not easy to find quick replacements. I do get times of connection and intimacy from my friends but most of them are with people who have another, more significant, relationship, such as a spouse. They understandably don't have as much

intimacy to give when they have that foundation of a relationship and I am trying to be fulfilled with islands of intimacy.

The passage in Romans that Evie and Abby read talks about suffering. It feels a little awkward to call singleness suffering, especially when others are suffering from things that seem much more real like cancer, war, etc. But just as scripture doesn't rate particular sins worse than others, I don't think we should say our struggles aren't big enough to mention. If we want a true relationship with God, we should be able to share our whole lives with God, including the yucky, messy, ugly stuff.

Life is messy, for everyone—single or married—and God is there as we navigate it. If we think life is going to be perfect, or with only good times, we will always be disappointed. What I find most important is to be authentic. It's a vulnerable place to be sometimes, but I know it has deepened my friendships. If we admit what we struggle with, even if it's not something others understand or can help "solve", it feels good to be heard. We don't know what God is up to. Life isn't fair, and it often doesn't make sense. That's part of the unknown, mysterious character of God that we as humans will never fully understand. As author Brian McLaren says:

“God doesn't seem at all interested ... in making life easy. Easy means tame, boring, predictable, safe, and faithless. And the life God wants for us is nothing if it's not adventurous, exciting, challenging, mystifying, risky, and faith-stretching.”

“But God is God, not a genie. And God has a bigger frame of reference than we do. So, how do we retain some idea of God's guidance in our lives without turning God into an insurance policy to protect us from interesting, useful, and adventurous things like failure, delay, disappointment, surprise, challenge, insufficiency, bewilderment, and risk?”

What should we as Christians be focusing on anyway? Relationship status? If life has gone as we expected? If God hasn't given us what we think we have earned? I think our focus should be on our relationship with Christ. Walking with God is something that everyone – regardless of marital status – has in common. 1 Timothy 6:11 tells us to “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness” and Micah 6:8 tells us to “do justice, and to love kindness, and

to walk humbly with your God.” As people of faith, we can get to know each other on a personal level. Don’t make assumptions about another person’s life – find out. If we are vulnerable together we learn to know each others desires, worries, struggles, and joys. This helps us know how to support and pray for each other and be Christ’s loving, healing, caring presence. Praying is one of the best things – and sometimes the only thing – we can do for others.

And what about singles in particular? I’ve given you my perspective as an over-40, never-married, childless Christian woman, with a desire to be in a relationship. Other singles are in very different places and have vastly different needs and desires. Really, the only thing that singles have in common is being unmarried. After that, we’re as different as everyone else in the body of Christ.

Let me share four things that Christena’s suggested on her blog about how the church can embrace singles:

- 1) Admit that singleness is complex and that you know little to nothing about it. It isn’t a junior varsity version of marriage. It’s an entirely different sport and if you haven’t played it, you haven’t mastered it. Like marriage, singleness is complex. The challenges and joys of singleness are equal to but different than the challenges and joys of marriage. She suggested singleness is a different culture and you should treat singles as you would treat any other cross-cultural exploration.
- 2) Recognize that married people are privileged. You are well-represented in church, and more likely to get hired in the church. Just for getting married people buy you things. Marriage is the norm. If you don’t adhere to it, people ask questions. You can restore balance by listening well, and being an advocate for the viewpoint of those that aren’t married.
- 3) Affirm that marital status isn’t correlated with godliness or maturity. Marriage isn’t a fruit of the spirit. Married people haven’t “arrived” in a way single people haven’t.
- 4) Celebrate with us. We don’t have the things in our life that are commonly celebrated such as weddings and kids. So we often feel left out. Even if it’s not a public party it’s nice to be acknowledged with a note or a mention.

A few things I would suggest:

Give us hugs – if we like hugs, of course. Many singles don't have a lot of opportunity for physical contact. If we like children, let us cuddle on your children.

Involve us in your lives. Parents have easy connections with their children. But childless singles can struggle to find those connections with other adults. Invite us to lunch after church. It can be depressing to come to church and then have to go home to eat alone.

And I would say the biggest thing you can do for singles is pray. Pray for us to live in God's will and pray for our desires, whatever they are – contentment, a spouse, connections and intimacy, or an invitation to a movie.

May we ALL strive to discover God's will for our lives and learn to truly know each other. May we realize that life is messy for everyone, but God is there with us as we navigate it. Because as this morning's scripture said: We know that all things work together for good for those who love God.

Christena Cleveland's blog post: "Singled Out: How the Church Can Embrace Single Adults"
<http://www.christenacleveland.com/2013/12/singled-out/>

Brian McLaren quote: Article "Across the Great Divide" on Lifeway.com. Originally in Christian Single magazine.