

MARRIAGE, DIVORCE & SINGLENESS

Genesis 1: 26-27. Matthew 19: 3-12.

A few years ago I watched a news special that focussed on the growing phenomenon of younger persons who are choosing to be single in a world that too often expects people to pair up. Three women in their 30s, all friends, all successful in their careers, spoke about their choice for singleness. One had been married and was now divorced. After dating for a while, she came to discover she enjoyed being on her own and having friends without any permanent cohabitating or marriage commitment.

Another had never been married, although she had dated over the years, especially as pressured by her family with their cultural background. The expectation was that she would get married and have children. They believed that her personal career goals and other aspirations were secondary to the successful destiny of every woman – to find a husband and have children. Her choice to refuse that destiny had put her at odds with them.

The third woman had also dated over the years, both men and women, but had come to realize that she was asexual. She had no interest in any relationship where sexual intimacy was expected. This is how she was made and accepting herself was instrumental to her personal fulfillment. Being single was the right choice for her and she was glad she had discovered it before she had got herself into a more permanent relationship where expectations could lead to pain and hurt.

At the same time, all three women had experienced some form of judgement or pity for their choice to be single. But finding each other and a growing community of other singles had opened them up to the joys of friendship and a life unencumbered by the burdens and responsibilities of those with families and households to care for.

Was this selfishness? Not at all. All three women had the time and focus to get involved in various causes, volunteering, and even caring for family members because they were available. If they were married with children, this would not be possible in the same way.

And yet, I also wonder to what extent people who choose singleness can feel at home in many of our churches, let alone many of our communities. There is, often, a social expectation that people pair up in some way, and if they are not paired up, especially as the years progress, it can be seen as a failure or deficiency. Is the person incapable of developing an intimate relationship? Is there something about them that has turned people away? Are they relationally challenged?

But what do the scriptures say? Well, in the New Testament in particular, singleness is not seen as a deficiency and marriage is not seen as the ultimate goal for every person. In fact, singleness is often seen as a form of liberation while marriage is sometimes seen as a burden that precludes other opportunities in life. How so? Let's explore this theme as we work through our scripture readings in search of revelatory insight. Whether we are paired up or single, how may we find our purpose and how may the light of Christ shine through us?

Well, let's begin with our first reading from the first chapter in the bible. Our verses are part of a larger story about the creation of the world. One of the big themes in this opening chapter is the beauty of diversity and multiplicity in creation. Throughout we are told that the creator God delights in creation's multiplicity and diversity. In fact, God is astonished by it as the diversity points to a creativity within the creational process God has initiated but not controlled ("and God said, 'let' the birds and the fish etc... be fruitful and multiply...").

The other thing that is beautiful in this opening chapter is that there is no hierarchy in creation. Humans may have a certain responsibility for creation, but this has nothing to do with dominating creation or other humans made in God's image. All are equally precious. The emphasis rather is on the beauty of diversity and multiplicity. Hierarchy would limit both. Dominating, using and abusing other life, judging others as inferior or as less human and worthy of love, care and respect, is a violation of God's clear intention for creation. Forcing any part of creation to limit its diversity because it is judged as flawed, is a sin against the creator.

Well, how different this vision is from the world as it has been and is now and probably will continue to be even as we are called to work to change it. And this is especially clear in the very diversity of gender within human beings themselves. What are we told in the verses we heard read? God created humankind in God's image and likeness to shine love into the world and take responsibility for its flourishing. And God created humans male and female. Diversity is good. The male-female spectrum is good. It doesn't have to be an either or, and it doesn't have to be one gender ruling another gender because they think they are superior. And it doesn't have to be one way a gender must be expressed to be acceptable. There is diversity in what maleness or femaleness means as much as there is diversity on a spectrum.

And this very diversity and equality of genders is very much the framework of Jesus' whole gospel proclamation. We need to understand this in order to understand what Jesus has to say about divorce. In Jesus' world divorce is not only common, but very easy, if you are a man. You can divorce your wife and you have no legal obligations for her afterwards. The children are yours, property is yours and you keep all the money you work for and have inherited.

So what about the woman? She cannot work, she cannot own property and she cannot keep her children. And even if she wants to leave the marriage regardless of all she will lose, she isn't allowed to initiate the divorce. Only a man can. A woman's only recourse is to move in with a

surviving father, brother or son and their families, should her husband divorce her. Or else, she must be claimed in marriage by some other man. A pretty raw deal, no?

Imagine how vulnerable a woman may feel in a marriage if a husband abuses her, takes advantage of her or threatens her with divorce. What are her options for surviving? Either she hopes for a decent and kind husband who will treat her with some dignity and respect, or else, she has to put up with a bad situation because the alternative is pretty stark. Jesus reaches out to many women who are in some bad situations, such as the famous account of his encounter with a Samaritan woman in John's gospel or the woman captured to be stoned for whom he intercedes successfully. Many of these women become his closest, most faithful followers and friends. Mary Magdalene, and sisters Mary and Martha are great examples. Were they divorced by their husband, widowed like Jesus' mother Mary or just singles who didn't fit the accepted cultural norm for women?

Well, into this context Jesus declares that divorce is wrong. Why? Because a husband has to be responsible for the welfare and well-being of his wife. Unless there is unchastity, he better work hard to make it work. A wife has the right to have a roof over her head, raise her children and not live in fear she will be thrown out if she burns her husband's toast some morning, or worse, if she cannot bear children. You see the message? It's very consistent with Jesus' whole gospel of shining God's love toward those most vulnerable and challenging his people, from the leaders on down, to rebuild Israel according to a kingdom vision where everyone is treated as equally precious, regardless of gender, made fully in God's image.

So what about the religious laws as Moses gave them to the people? The leaders pick and choose which laws they take literally regardless of context and purpose. Since they all claim to be men, they have no problem adhering to laws that limit the rights of women in a relationship or make divorce conveniently easy for men to keep their women in line. But Jesus declares that Moses gave such laws grudgingly, because the men were "hard-hearted" and wouldn't accept a higher standard based on love. Society had already developed a built-in patriarchy. But this was not God's intention at the beginning. Wow! isn't this an amazing re-interpretation of scripture by Jesus?! He is telling the religious authorities they're reading scripture wrong because they don't consider historical context and cultural biases. God's intentions must not be imprisoned by flawed human and cultural perspectives that undermine the full worth, value and rights of all genders.

But here's the thing: the disciples also live in a patriarchal world. They ask Jesus how it's possible to expect men to be so consistently responsible and caring with their wives, refusing to divorce them for reasons less serious than unfaithfulness? Giving up power and privilege if you are a man in that world is not realistic. If everyone embraced God's vision of gender equality and oneness in marriage would men in particular not rethink getting married in the first place?

Well, here is where Jesus gives a response that is totally unexpected. Jesus doesn't just encourage people to get married. He uses this opportunity to make a case for diversity and multiplicity of options. He brings in the whole gender category of a "eunuch." In the ancient world, a eunuch represents someone who doesn't fit the normative gender categories or social expectations for relationships. There are eunuchs who have experienced gender change because of what has been done to them physically. There are eunuchs who have been born with internal or external anatomy that is not strictly male or female (today we call them intersex). Both of these kinds of eunuchs we will talk about next Sunday.

But thirdly, Jesus identifies those who have made certain life choices that don't fit the roles assigned to them with the gender of their birth. He calls them "eunuchs" also because in that world, any person who prefers not to marry and remains single, would be judged as disturbed, deficient or unfaithful to God's intention for human beings. In Jesus' world actually choosing to be single would be judged much more harshly than in our world today.

But you know, in the early days of the church, many Christians who chose singleness would point not only to Jesus' words, but also his example. Jesus was single and would probably have been judged for that on top of everything else. And he associated with others, men, women and eunuchs who were single by circumstances or choice, or they were divorced or widowed. Whatever the case, they had remained single. Mary and Martha lived with their brother Lazarus who owned their family home, but the three of them were single and they were Jesus' closest of friends. The apostle Paul in his letters makes a case for singleness. And he follows very closely what Jesus says in our scripture reading. Choosing the single life wasn't a choice because one couldn't find a partner. No. Choosing to be single liberated you to do all kinds of other things including developing friendships in community and service in the name of Christ; options that were just not possible in the same way for married persons with households. Each had their responsibilities and gifts. One was not better than another. Diversity and multiplicity of options is a wonderful part of God's creation, not something to be feared or judged.

And yet Paul and Jesus and the many women of their circle will have felt judged in their world, as would the eunuch, who did not fit into the accepted gender identities of man or woman according to the cultural biases of the day. Christian communities would be seen as detrimental to society because they didn't encourage the birthing of babies as the highest call of every woman, and the multiplicity of children as the highest call of a man. Caring for another human, whatever their gender, is the true fulfillment of human creation in the image of God.

So then, once again, as we break free of traditional interpretations of the bible and of Jesus, we are also creating space for the diversity of gender and relationship realities in our world. Being divorced is not a sin and neither is choosing to be single. What is a sin is abusing and

mistreating others or judging them as less human because they don't fit our gender stereotypes or our ideas of how they should express and live out their gender identities.

Thank you Jesus and thank you Holy Spirit for blowing your liberating wind through our hearts and minds and opening us up to hear you speak anew in these ancient writings we call scripture... Amen.