

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
May 18 & 19, 2013
John Crosby
Valuable: Singles
1 Corinthians 7: 1-9**

For the next four weeks we want to be saying that we believe that you are valuable, that you matter. Our perception is that, when any group gets past the size where everybody knows everybody else's name, there are some who feel on the inside and some who feel on the outside, like they don't count quite as much. Let me ask you this. Have you ever had this experience? You come to a door. There's something happening inside the room. You go through the door and look around and you don't see anybody that you know. Not only do you not see anybody you know, but everyone in there looks like they know each other and nobody turns and says, "Hey, come on in!" They just keep talking with each other, and you feel like you are on the outside looking in. Anybody ever had that before? All of us!

That's why we need to talk about value to the folks who are looking into the room saying, "Wow, they're all a lot younger than I am. Where do I fit in?" "Wow, they all have kids. Where do I fit in?" "Wow, they're all men. Where do I fit in?" Each time we look into the room and feel there is nobody like us, we don't feel valuable. Sometimes it's just a matter of emphasis, a matter of getting the words right. On the plane ride, Laura showed me something about words, how they change when you look at them different ways. It's just a little phrase here. It says, *Let's eat, Grandma*. And that makes sense. She was going to get this for a T-shirt for a friend of ours who says words matter. Right below it is another phrase, *Let's eat Grandma*. Punctuation makes a big difference, friends. Perspective makes us feel we are valuable or we are not.

Today's text is from Paul's 1st Letter to the church in Corinth. It's right after Pentecost. This church in Corinth is a Pentecost church, how the church is supposed to be, and already they are running into problems. This is how Paul starts chapter 7.

1 Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

This is not a great story. "Paul, really? You know, in fifty years the church is out of existence." Is that what he really means? Or is this what he really means? "Now for the matters that you wrote about, it is good for a man not to have sex with a woman." What he is doing is quoting the Corinthians themselves. The Corinthians have written him a note saying, "As we understand this Jesus stuff, you are saying it is better for us not to have sex even when we are married." It is the Corinthians who are saying this, not Paul, and they are talking about married people so Paul has to set them straight.

2 But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. **3** The husband should fulfill his

marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. **4** The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband.

That was the standard of the ancient day. The wife's body belonged to the husband. So far it's normal. **But** then it goes on,

In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.

Revolutionary! Women have rights!

5 Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer.

This is an unusual situation.

Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. **6** I say this as a concession, not as a command.

It is not a command that you abstain from sex. Paul then says,

7 I wish that all of you were as I am.

We'll get back to that later.

But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. **8** Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. **9** But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. **10** To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord):

This is not me. This is the Lord.

A wife must not separate from her husband.

This is an incredibly complicated passage. About that last phrase, "A wife must not separate from her husband," I want to say that it is not about divorce. It is about the idea that many of the women had become followers of Jesus but many of the men had not. The women were saying, "Oh, I follow Jesus now and my husband doesn't. I probably should set this aside so that I can fully follow the Lord." Paul says, "No, no, no. It is imperative that you stay with your husband so that he will see your faith and come to faith himself." That's why it's so important to understand what was going on in the past.

We are going to put up on the screen a way for you to understand. This is called Message Gear. Every week about 300 of you look at Message Gear on the front page of our website: www.cpconline.org. You just click on Message Gear and there is a Bible study there for this passage that will go into all the complicated details in here.

Today I just want to make two points. The first is that this Pentecost church on Pentecost still struggles with sexuality, with singleness, with marriage as it has for 2,000 years. Many of these

people had experienced the fire of the Spirit in Jerusalem at Pentecost, but they are still messed up about how the church should act. Sexuality, singleness, marriage is not a problem to be solved. It is a tension that broken people like you and I live in all of our lives. Some of the Corinthians are saying that now that they are following Jesus, they are finally free to have sex whenever and with whomever they want. Paul has just dealt in chapter 5 with a guy who is sleeping with his stepmother, and the church is bragging about it. Aren't we free? He says *no*. At the other extreme, some are promoting abstinence in marriage; that is, no sex anywhere at any time because the body is bad and the Spirit is good. The highest plane of spirituality is to forego anything physical. Paul says, *wrong again*.

That leads to the second point I want to leave you with today. It's in verse 7 where Paul says, "I wish that all of you were as I am." I wish that all of you were like me. Now Paul is almost certainly single, but he has almost certainly not always been single because he has been a rabbi and rabbis had to be married. Like many people of his day, Paul was a widower and he is saying in part, "I wish that you were like me, free to spend all of your time on the Gospel." But then he says this is not the way it has to be. "Each of you has your own gift from God. One has this gift, singleness. One this gift, marriage. So for some, marriage is what you are gifted with and for others, for this season, singleness is the gift that God has given you." Now that sounds great in a sermon but for many people, singleness does not feel like a gift. In our culture, people can feel like spare parts. In our churches, people can wonder if there is a place for them. There can be constant questioning of, what's wrong with me? What's different about me?

I want to give you some thoughts about singleness in the Body of Christ, and then I want to talk to somebody who is experiencing singleness firsthand. Thought No. 1: Singleness, being unmarried, is not a sentence or a disease. I am sure some of you are glad to hear that. On any given Sunday fully 40 percent of you in this room are not in traditional marriages. You are single because you are still growing up. Or you have gotten divorced. Or you have never gotten married. Or you are widowed. I want to say to you that I believe **God uses singleness in our lives as a gift to focus us on things we would not be free to do if we had marriage and a family.**

Thought No. 2: **I believe God puts single people among us because they understand the pain of other singles, the challenges of being single in ways that married people forget.** Singleness lets us be empathic. I also believe God uses the gift of singleness to model that the key to fulfilled life is not marriage. When the apostle Paul wrote this, marriage was not a great bargain. Many of you today are married and unfulfilled and lonely or angry, but just think of what it was like in Paul's day. Arranged marriages. You had no choice, and in many ways you had no chance. Divorce was always the prerogative of the man. The woman was often seen as property, someone who could be cast out.

Even though Jewish law made it better, marriage is tough. Singleness is not a disease. It is not a sentence. It is a gift from God. A hard gift sometimes. That's thought No. 2. I believe that we cheat ourselves if we don't tell the truth that singleness is not easy. In our culture, singleness is not an easy condition, and if we don't recognize this, and that the folks around us who are not fitting into the little Norman Rockwell picture of the family, and that these folks struggle, then the church fails. I got a teaching from a guy named Chuck DeGroat, who talks to singles and says singleness is not easy. He says this to singles:

Your disappointment is very, very real. Because our desires for companionship or intimacy or sex get thwarted time and time again, we find ourselves confused. After all, God wants us to be satisfied, right? Jesus spoke of the abundant life, but so much of what the church talks about to singles is not about the abundant life. It is about sin management, not a flourishing life but sin management. So guys, being guys, feel guilty about sexual obsession and women, being women, often feel bad about what's wrong that I haven't found the perfect guy? Christian community whose big message is sin management plays into that. It may look clean on the outside but on the inside be what Jesus calls *white-washed tombs* because we force people to lie. *Yeah, everything's fine.* Or to fake it, *oh, I love this.* Or they force people, single or married, to say, *well, as soon as....*

We define the abundant life by what we avoid, *I'm obedient to God*, or what we consume. We are consumers of pleasure. Jesus blows up both of those extremes and calls us to live fully in the now, looking toward the cross and seeing joy that will never come through managing sin better. It comes through putting our trust in Christ and walking with Him, believing that God has built me the way that I am and that my identity is not to be single, not to be married, not to be a kid or a grandpa. My identity is as a child of God, a subject of King Jesus and when I live like that, I have a chance.

Thought No. 3 about single people in church is that the answer in the Bible to fulfilled relationships is not marriage and the family. That's the American dream but not the dream of the Bible. The American church more than any other has focused on Dick and Jane Tithingunit and their 2.3 children, but I'm convinced a **Biblical theology places community first, which is only complete when there are single people and married people, widows and orphans and divorced people, and people on the outside looking in, who get drawn in.** To say that marriage is normal or that single is normal misses the point of the Bible. Life together in this community is what Jesus calls us to, all of us.

I've been thinking that it's easy to paint a solid picture of the theology of singleness but as a person who has been married almost as long as I was single, it's pretty hard to talk about it with experience. I asked somebody who is in the middle of this season to come up and do that. Carrie Gleeson grew up in our church and works with our Student Ministries. I asked her to share with you some of what it is like to be a follower of Jesus as a person who is single.

(John:) I guess I'd start with one of the points I made that singleness is not a disease. It is a gift from God. I'd ask you, Carrie, do you ever experience that gift as a single person?

(Carrie:) I absolutely do, and thank you for taking your time to talk about this. I think it is important, no matter where we are in life, to talk about value and who we are as people because we are all different. One of the things in my life where I see not being married as a gift from God is, throughout my twenties, I got to really lean into my identity in Christ and really lean into the calling that God has for my life. I love that we just talked about Jonah and learned that God still calls us to things. God has specific things for each of us to do in life. I've been able to live out my calling in a way that I would not have been able to had I been married or had children. From a young age, I've been in ministry. I started when I was 19 and in college, and then went on full-time staff. But even if you're not in vocational ministry doing the things in your calling, being involved in service in the church

or parent church organization and loving people and pointing people to Jesus is pretty amazing.

(John:) So being single, the gift for you so far has been that your identity is not in your marital status but in Christ, and you have been offered the freedom to do things you couldn't have done for Christ had you been married. I think that is absolutely true. I also said that I think it is challenging being single in a culture, in a church, where it feels like everybody is married. How have you experienced that?

(Carrie:) Well, I think the points you made in your sermon are true, that the American church has invited and developed this idea of consumerism, what can I get out of it, what is it going to do in my life, how is it going to help me and do things for me? But biblically, that is not what the church is about. For me it is to come in and say, where can I start, what can I do, how can I love on people, how can I minister to children and families? I think that the church in many respects has just gotten it backwards. We want to live like the culture tells us to live. We allow societal pressures, the ways in which the world operates, into the Body of Christ, but when you study Scripture, God's way of living is completely opposite from the way that the world says. I mean we are broken people but we are trying to live out that Jesus relationship, impersonating Jesus no matter what that looks like or where we are in life. When we allow our American operating system to infiltrate the church, I think that it does a lot of damage to many different groups of people.

Obviously my bent on that, my perspective on that, is from a single point of view, but so many times I feel like the good piece of it is that we want to focus on children. We want children to be raised pursuing Jesus and knowing Jesus and because of that, we need to minister to their parents as well. This is a beautiful thing; but, so many times, we've spent so much energy focusing on children and their families that singles, regardless of whether you are 18, 25, or 45 or 65, it's just *stay over there until we figure out what to do with you, until we create a program for you*. I don't want another program to fit into, and I'm saying this as a staff member of this church, who runs a program. A program is not going to solve the problems that we have.

(John:) So what I hear you saying is that this challenging place in life is made more so when we are so programmed that we think if there is not a program for me, I don't have a place here. But you are saying you don't think the answer is a program. We didn't have a chance to talk about that until coffee this morning, but one of the things you talked about was some of the inter-generational stuff that you see. What would be an example of that?

(Carrie:) Well, I run Commitment Class on Wednesday nights, and I think we see it there. We have high school seniors who are student leaders and adult coaches who are anywhere from, I think, 40 to 60 years of age who are helping to build and inform our leaders. Personally, I have been involved in multiple inter-generational small groups and I love it. I lived in Nebraska for the past decade or so. Last week I saw two women I was in a small group with all last spring in Nebraska. They are both about to become empty nesters. Their last children are graduating from high school, today, actually. There were other women in their 60s in our group and two of us who were in our twenties. It was just an amazing experience. They always laughed and said, "We've tainted your view of what

it's like to get older and what it's like to have kids and get married." But I said, "No, I've learned so much from you, and I love being involved in an inter-generational community."

I personally attend The Table on a regular basis and have been involved in a small group at The Table. The Table I think has done a really good job of creating an inter-generational community. My small group at The Table is made up of four unmarried women and two married women, and we do life just fine with that and don't need to be separated out by marital status, and it's beautiful.

(John:) So when the church is the church, not just that there is a place for everybody but that we are connected in ways that make all of us more of whom God intended us to be, it is still not easy. It's not cookie cutter but it is fruitful. It is life-giving. Thank you, Carrie. Thank you very much.

I tell singles sometimes that I feel their vision of singles gets too singular, too single. They can tend to focus too much on finding someone instead of focusing on how they might thrive and how other people around them might thrive. It seems to me that we need to ask, what would it look like if all of us were to focus on the community? Not my niche, not my program, not my family, not singleness. What would it look like to anticipate the new community that Paul was trying to build in Corinth? The echo of the new heaven and earth, where the posturing and posing and the waiting will be no more, and where self-sacrifice will be the norm and other sanctity will be what we expect, not just for singles but for all of us.

I'm saying this from the perspective of a dad who is letting his little girl get married next Sunday. This is a tough week for me because I know, but she does not know, that marriage is never the answer. You do not walk out as Adam and Eve into the Garden of Eden. You walk out into thorns and weeds as one broken person with another broken person, and you only slowly come to the place as a married person where you realize that this person cannot fulfill me. This person is not meant to fulfill me. How can I ever be content with who I am?

Let's go back to what Paul said in verse 7. "I wish that all of you were as I am." He is not talking about being single. He's not talking about being married. He is saying, "I wish that you were like me in that you *were content*." Paul says, "I have learned to be content, whatever the circumstance. I know what it's like to be in need. I know what it's like to have plenty. I've learned the secret to being content. I wish you were all like me, content in all situations, well-fed or hungry, sick or well, single or married, young or old. I can do all these things through Christ who gives me strength." How do we live that as a community? I want us to find and share with honesty and vulnerability and transparency how we can love each other in a way that moves us all toward Jesus.

Last week Deb talked about women who often have felt like, unless they are given tasks to do, that there is not a place of leadership or significance for them in the church. The passage she used said that now there is neither slave nor free, neither Jew nor Gentile, neither male nor female, neither married nor single. We are all one in Christ. We are free in Christ and to be reminded of that, we come here to the table. There is a place set at this table for you and if you are not here and if you don't bring someone, then there will be an empty place at the table of the love of God. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, I thank You so much for the incredible ways that single men and single women of all ages have blessed me, have changed my children, have done great things for the Kingdom of Heaven and modeled what living fruitfully can look like. I pray that You will help us to be the kind of community that opens its arms wide that we might live together and together take the bread and bless it and say, "This is the Body of Jesus." I pray that we might take the cup and bless it and say, "This cup, not marriage, not children, not that relationship, this cup not only washes us clean but makes us new for all of eternity." Bless us as we come, the broken and the lonely, the laughing and the joy-filled. Bless us as we come and help us to love one another. We pray in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.