

May 23, 2010
Grove Presbyterian Church

The early Christian church, popular among women because it welcomed women equal to men, created a problem because of its popularity. What do you do with widows both young and old, especially when the church community is their only family?

There was no Medicare, no Social Security checks, no retirement funds, no nursing homes, no retirement villages. The church cared for them. Fed them.

Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once; she must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way.

Most of us want to feel useful. We want to be wanted. We want a little dignity in these golden years, which, given the alchemy of age, don't necessarily feel so golden. So the 'real' widows, those who had no options, became, in effect, the first glimmer of the caste of nuns. Real widows were those beyond marriageable age and who lacked family, as Naomi had Ruth and Ruth Naomi. They could be sent out to help others, nurse the sick, help young mothers, set up for funerals.

But what about younger widows? Their situation was more complicated. They could either be a great help or very disruptive. Since they still had options, better (so the church patriarchs directed) that they should devote themselves more to family than to church work, at least for now. The younger ones might start out trying to fill up their emptiness with church work. Yet, that doesn't satisfy as much as a husband next to you and a baby in your arms.

But refuse to put younger widows on the list; for when their sensual desires alienate them from Christ, they want to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge. Besides that, they learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house; and they are not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say. So I would have younger widows marry,

bear children, and manage their households, so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us. For some have already turned away to follow Satan. If any believing woman has relatives who are really widows, let her assist them; let the church not be burdened, so that it can assist those who are real widows.

We're not asking you to like what I Timothy says. But try to appreciate that it, at the least, clarified for women in that society where they stood. Not as if single women had a whole lot of options in those days anyway. The church tried to give them place and definition. A place to be needed.

A clarity of place which perhaps a few of our modern single women (and single men) might welcome (though not necessarily as I Timothy prescribes). In our modern church culture which extols couples and idolizes families - family activities, church dances, tables set for 8, the family pew -- scripture tells there is value, worth, and opportunity in singleness.

Do you consider yourself single, I asked friends across this country?

- ▲ I actually don't think of myself in terms of my marital status,
- ▲ I've decided that I don't really want any label - single, married, widowed, liberal, conservative, middle-aged, over-the-hill, etc. I don't like to be defined by a single word.

Still: prom tickets: \$10 for one, \$15 if coming as a couple.

Still:

- ▲ On the rare occasions that I do go, all the things I think will happen, do happen.. I find myself standing around hoping someone will talk with me, I feel awkward and out of place. It is usually quite obvious that different couples socialize regularly outside of church and they are engaged in a bit of "inside conversation" and you feel even more out of place. The one thing you do get good at is "acting as though"... acting as though you are confident, acting as though you are single because you prefer it, acting

as though you have social ease, acting as though you are anything but lonely.

- ▲ Some people have gone out of their way to make me feel not so lonely... coming up to me to engage me at coffee hour or before or after church. I do, often, wish that someone would invite me to sit with them during church.. It has always been extra lonely to sit there by myself week after week.
- ▲ My church family was certainly there for me when I needed them, but believe it or not, after my husband died church was one of the hardest places to be - not because of any crisis of faith - but just because of the emotions that were stirred up. Even now some music or words will stir tears.

***I lie awake. And am as a sparrow alone upon the house top
Psalm 102: 7***

Here's a few modern facts:

- The age when young adults marry has increased: 26 for women, 27 for men.
- 51% of women are not married.
- Women are waiting longer to have children: 25 for first child (add 4 or 5 years if the woman is college educated.
- 25% of households today are made up of the nuclear family: a mom, dad, and kids

25%. That changes the context of 'family values.'
Remember when the church bemoaned the loss of the extended family? Now even the nuclear family is a rarity.

Exactly, today, how do we describe a good 'Christian Home?'

Every person here this morning will be single if you aren't already. Or dead.

For some by divorce. That big invisible indelible red 'D' written on your forehead.

And us here married? If you don't die first, you will become single. Every relationship gets ruptured one way or another. And the more our life span increases, so does (oddly enough) the length of widowhood or widower-hood. That big indelible ashen grey 'W ' written on your forehead.

One of you will die before the other. It is the way of it. This C. S. Lewis realized after the death of his beloved wife. He wrote: "bereavement is just as much a part of marriage as the honeymoon."

But not as much fun.

I'm going to go out on a limb here, but, in all my experience, I have yet to meet a person who wanted to remain single.

100% of the time, they are making the best of choices and circumstance. Some learn to appreciate, even embrace their solitude. Dogs help. Friendship is so underrated.

Yes, 100% of the time singleness is not their choice, Hollywood nonsense aside.

100% of the time they want a partner, a companion.

Better for others to speak.

What are the advantages to being single?

- ▲ No one ever eats the last cookie on me.
- ▲ Independence
- ▲ Freedom to live as you please
- ▲ Nobody else's things to pick up or clean up after.

What are the disadvantages to being single?

- ▲ Independence
- ▲ Freedom to live as you please
- ▲ Nobody else's things to pick up or clean up after.
- ▲ It can get lonely, depressing. There are days when I come home from work and would love to tell someone about my day, but no one is there. I can call someone, and sometimes do, but it's not the same as having someone at home waiting for me. Also, when I

- have moments of terror in the middle of the night, there's no physical presence there to assure me.
- ▲ The cats don't ever tell me how pretty I look and they don't hug that well (it is really amazing how much I miss hugs). No one to share funny things with.. the sound of solitary laughter can really be gut wrenching.
 - ▲ Finances are hard for many of us.. for me, I just don't have the resources that I would have if I were not single.
 - ▲ The biggest fear I have is that I will hurt myself at home and no one will find me for days and days.
 - ▲ If I want to do something fun it's always me and the couples. I don't like to do things alone, to go out and eat alone as a single. I didn't mind as much as a part of a couple because I knew it was an occasional thing. I was grounded, 'part of the club' when I was married. In almost all social settings I feel like a fifth wheel.

What are ways the church has failed to minister to you?

- ▲ The church didn't have much extracurricular stuff that I was interested in going to at the time...certainly not a lot of young adult stuff. There were bible study related activities but I wasn't at a place in my faith that I felt like going to them. Now, there are more things but they are family-oriented.
- ▲ I'm not sure we do a very good job recognizing young adults looking for more than a sermon.
- ▲ Divorce affects the entire village. It would be good to talk about it and the repercussions for those who care about the victims. How do you approach both sides with the love of Christ without alienating the other? Could the church have a policy where it approaches the victims and gives them resources and encouragement to work through things? I don't know if it's the church's job, but I've yet to see a 'nice' divorce.
- ▲ I wish there was a way to network more through the church to find other people my age.

What are ways the church has effectively ministered to you?

- ⤴ I guess to sum up my feelings, I don't like labels that put us into a box - that separate us. I like inclusive language and inclusive activities. Church needs to offer that.
- ⤴ People who have experienced divorce approached me and gave me comfort, guidance and encouragement.
- ⤴ Patience. Inclusion.
- ⤴ Feel part of an extended family. I appreciate having people include/ love me just for me.

Although loneliness is not exclusive to single persons, does your faith help you cope with living alone?

- ⤴ I've been thinking lately of how it's funny how God can get pushed out of the picture.
- ⤴ I think I've learned that so much of life is about the attitude you bring to it.
- ⤴ I am finally coming to grips with the fact that I need to glorify God in all that I do and making exceptions only results in dead ends.

What fills you?

- ⤴ My faith, family, friends, hearing that there are Good Men out there who love God and want a family, even if they're not available to me. Sometimes I lose hope and it's good to be reminded.
- ⤴ Having a purpose fills me.
- ⤴ OFFERING IT UP. I HAVE LEARNED THERE ARE SOME TIMES WHEN YOU HAVE TO JUST TRUST YOURSELF, OTHERS, AND THAT THINGS ARE UNFOLDING THEY WAY THEY SHOULD

Sustains you?

- ⤴ God's unwavering presence. My children. Friends. Exercise. Work. Lots of food.
- ⤴ I am not sure what helps you cope with it other than making an effort to stay happy, keeping busy, keeping in touch with friends and family. Doing the hard work to come to terms with your reality.
- ⤴ Something, anything, to look forward to.

How often have we all - single or married -- made the mistake of thinking how our hunger could only be satisfied by what someone else could supply?

Please share whatever you believe needs to be heard.

- ^ Many will not make their own efforts to participate. Please remember us. Ask us.
- ^ I also remember that someone can be just as lonely as I am and be married. You truly don't know what is behind the social masks that we all wear.
- ^ WHERE THERE'S LIFE, THERE'S HOPE.
- ^ It's a struggle between being grateful for the MANY blessings in my life and wanting what seems impossible at times.
- ^ One time a very dear person told me about a gathering of mostly church people that happened in town from time to time. She invited me to go along. I thanked her and said I'd try to come. She had asked me to do things before and knew that I would likely back out so she told me that she was going to come and get me so I should be prepared.. I was going. I found myself relieved.. I was a bit annoyed at the lack of choice but I realized that that was probably a good thing in this case. I smiled and told her I guessed I better get myself ready. Unfortunately, she must have forgotten. She never came. That was a pretty lonely night.

***Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.***