Book 1

Sunday September 25, 1977

"HUMAN SEXUALITY AND THE SINGLE PERSON" (No. 3 in a series on "The Bible and Human Sexuality)

I Corinthians 7:25-27, 32-35

In our world today, more and more persons over the age of 21 years are single, not married. Some of these individuals have either decided not to marry or to wait until they are older before they marry. Others are divorced and in this group some will marry again and others will not. In addition, our population contains more and more widows who remain single. In the United States, one out of every six women over the age of 21 is a widow. Also, according to a 1976 survey of the Census Bureau, the number of persons between the ages of 25-34 who have never married has increased by almost 50% since 1970.

In our congregation there are more single persons that in the past. A survey of our church membership a little more than a year ago revealed that almost one-fourth of our members who are adults are single. Some have not been married, others are divorced and have not re-married and still others are widows or widowers.

The times are changing. There are also more and more single men and women who choose to live together without being legally married. Some of these make a commitment to each other and yet do not go through the legal step of being officially married. Others after having lived together for a time, then take the additional step of publicly making a life-time commitment to each other in a marriage ceremony. And most couples who are being married in these times are having fewer children than couples did twenty years ago.

Our purpose this morning, however, is not to talk so much about marriage, as it is about what it means to be single, and what the Bible has to say that.

First let's look briefly at the Old Testament. The people of the Old Testament found the commandment, "Be fruitful and multiply," to be a matter of the survival of the race. The death rate of babies and young children was high, so many babies had to be born to insure the survival of the people. Also if the babies which survived were to be raised in a secure environment, a strong family base was

necessary. Thus central to the Jewish tradition of sexual morality was the injunction to marry. Marriage was seen as a religious duty, affirmed by all the codes of Jewish law.

Because of this, the Hebrew woman's ability to have children was her primary contribution to the family and to society. The barren woman became a symbol of shame and reproach in Israel. It was cause for derision by other women and reduced the status of the wife along with the whole household. The barren woman, by definition, was denied the principal honor of woman, which was motherhood. If a woman could not have children she also lost her sole source and arena of authority--the mother-child relationship which alone among all her relationships granted her unchallenged power and independent authority over the lives of others.

Because having children was so important and because of the male dominated society, polygamy and the right to have concubines were accepted for a long time as a solution to an otherwise childless marriage. Thus there were very few single adults in Hebrew society, the only exception being widows. Marriage and having children were ways of survival. Also marriage was the primary way for a woman to have any identity at all and that identity came through her husband and motherhood.

In New Testament Christianity, especially in the Gospels, little is said about marriage or about being single. Perhaps the early Christians simply accepted the main Jewish traditions about the need for marriage. At the same time, it is not at all clear that marriage was seen as such a strong religious duty as it had been in the Jewish religion. It is significant that Jesus Christ remained single. The Apostle Paul also remained single and even advised other Christians that if possible it would be better for them to remain single as he was. Some of the original twelve disciples were married, but it is also likely that some remained single. Some of the women who were close followers of Jesus were also single.

But let's look more closely at the Apostle Paul for he had the most to say about being single.

In his first letter to the Church at Corinth, Paul talks about the advantages of being single and at the same time

admits that "because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband." He added however, that he was giving this advice by way of concession and not as a command. He went on to say, "I wish that all were as I myself am," in other words, I wish that all would remain single. Paul loved to give advice so he went on to say to the Corinthian Christians, "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion." Paul was saying, "if you can't exercise sexual self-control, then at least be married."

Again, in all of this advice, Paul admitted that he had no command of the Lord, but rather was simply giving his own views on the matter. And note particularly that a large part of the reason Paul advised those who were single to remain so was that he expected the return of Jesus Christ very soon, perhaps within a year or two or sooner, and then the new age would begin and the present world come to an end. Paul was wrong in his estimate of the nearness of the end of the age and there are indications in his later epistles that he came to recognize this fact.

But in spite of this, Paul implied to the Corinthian Church that being free from the anxieties which marriage often brings, the single person can be more concerned about the affairs of the Lord. He believed that the married person is more anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his or her spouse and their interests are divided. Again Paul admits that this advice is his own opinion and not anything which Jesus taught. He was simply trying to promote good order and to secure each person's undivided devotion to the Lord.

I mention all of this because the opinions of the Apostle Paul show a significance difference from the Jewish tradition in which he was educated. In particular Paul implies there are other roles for women than being wife or mother. An individual's identity is not primarily to be found in his or her function, role or marital state.

From all of this then, what can we infer about being single or being married as far as the Bible and the Christian faith are concerned?

1. In the first place from a Christian point of view, being single and remaining so is as much a natural state for individuals as being married. Neither is to be more approved as far as God is concerned. As mentioned earlier, both Jesus and St. Paul remained single. What we are saying is that each person, female or male, is created a single unique individual, complete in him or herself. We do not need marriage to complete ourselves.

This means that as Christians we need to recognize singleness as a legitmate way of life and an acceptable status for individuals who make that choice. Too often those of us who are married tend to think of all people by two's. And if we think of single persons at all, it is that one day they will be married or remarried so that being single is just a temporary condition.

2. This means secondly for the single person that he or she need not think of themselves as being in-complete because of not being married. The major goal of life is not to be found in having or husband or wife and having children. A female or male is a complete sexual being in themselves, as they are.

For those who decide to marry or who are married, this means that if we expect marriage to solve our incompleteness or our immaturity, or our basic loneliness, or our lack of meaning or direction in life, we are usually headed for trouble. We can gain a lot from and in our marriages, but we are not to make marriage a god or anything else.

In fact in a good marriage, two complete single mature individuals make a public commitment to each other, for better for worse, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want. Two single individuals bring their total selves to the marriage, and each person in addition to being married needs to at the same time remain a single whole individual. A popular marriage vow which is frequently used in our time includes this idea. Listen! "I promise that I will strengthen and support you by sharing my joys and fears; and at the same time in patience and trust give you room to grow and the freedom to be your own self."

Some people get married with a possessive kind of love which is not a mature love and which seeks to totally possess and control the other person in the marriage.

That kind of love soon becomes destructive. Others seek to find their identity in the marriage and in the life of the spouse. That too eventually becomes destructive. In marriage, one and one do not become one. One and one becomes one and one together. Sometimes our language implies something else. Often we will introduce our spouse by saying, "I want you to meet my better half." Our language also betrays our attitude toward those who are single by calling them the "un-married," which implies that marriage is the normal state for human beings.

3. In the third place, because of a continuing male-oriented culture, and the fact that we tend to think in two's, although not as much so as in Bible times, the widow or the female divorcee who remains single has special problems. Too often in our culture, even as in Biblical times, the adult single woman who has been married and who is now single becomes what Lynn Caine in her book, "Widow" calls the lonely goose.

From the moment a goose realizes that the partner is missing, it loses all courage and flees even from the youngest and weakest geese. As its condition becomes known to all the flock, the lonely goose rapidly sinks to the lowest step in the ranking order. The goose can become extremely shy, reluctant to approach human beings and to come to the feeding place; the bird also develops a tendency to panic.

Lynne Caine says when she read this description of the goose, she was unpleasantly startled. She didn't want to have that much in common with a goose. One sentence struck her in particular, "The lonely goose rapidly sinks to the lowest step in the ranking order." That is exactly where she found herself. She had become a second class citizen, a member of the invisible minority of widows. Her identity was shaken. At times she felt practically non-existent.

She goes on to say, "A widow feels empty and incomplete because like most women she gained her identity through marriage. And when her husband died there she was. A widow. Empty. Without her husband to validate her existence. Without an identity of her own." Many women who go through divorce discover the same feeling.

Again, the point is that single or married, our Christian faith underscores the fact that each one of us is a total

complete human being in our own self. We are not to get our identity through another person. We each have our own identity within ourselves and that identity is bestowed upon us by God the Creator.

In the deepest sense, Lynne Caine is speaking for all single persons when she writes--"I am a woman whose husband has died, but not a second class citizen, not a lonely goose. I am a mother and a working woman and a friend and a sexual woman and a laughing woman and a concerned woman and a vital woman. I am a person. I resent what the term widow has come to mean. I am alive. I am part of the world.

I believe this is the way in which we in the church are to see and understand and accept single persons as well as married persons, as human beings, as persons, as individuals, complete in themselves, and as such a part of the community of God's people. Amen.