Sunday, June 14, 1998
SINGLENESS AND THE CHURCH
Luke 7:36-39

"A Pew for One, Please"

Those of us who are married and are church members sometimes forget that one-fourth to one-third of our church members are single. We might even forget that each one of us has been single at one time or another. We begin life that way. Some of us get married. Others do not. If we do get married, before we die we will be single again unless we die at the same precise time as our spouse. Being single is common to all of us.

In spite of this, it is a common misconception that people are single persons because of some unlucky accident of fate — such as divorce, death, or age, or because no one wants them. Furthermore, the state of being single is usually thought of as a condition that the single person will "cure" as soon as possible. When a person of 20 to 40 says that he or she is single, some people assume that the individual is "getting a need for a fling out of the system," is recuperating from a bad marriage in order to try again, or that they are some kind of celibate religious fanatic. It never seems to occur to others that some individuals are simply single because they want to be single — whether for a while or forever.

It's also true that our culture is more tolerant of the single state among men than among women. A man who has never married is a bachelor. A woman who has not been married is labeled a "spinster" or, worse, "an old maid."

Singleness is not as easy to describe as we might think. There are single people who are living with another person as if they are married but have not made it legal by obtaining a marriage license. There are people who are legally married who live as singles. They have never taken the legal step of getting a divorce. There are others who are legally married but because of their employment live in different cities and see each other only occasionally.

In a church congregation such as ours, we also have happily married people who are single in their church membership and participation. Their spouses might be members of another church or are not members of any religious institution.

The times are changing. Today more individuals are choosing to remain single, whereas in times past this was not much of an option. In some parts of the world, like ours, people who have a certain degree of economic and political security are in a quite different place than those in two-thirds of the world where poverty and sometimes political oppression are the grim facts of daily life. Being married, for many people in certain parts of the world, is a way of survival.

According to sociologists, historically, marriage, which formed the family unit, has had six basic functions: to control sexual access and relations; to provide an orderly context for reproduction; to nurture and socialize children; to furnish emotional nurture for its adult members; to provide a context for economic activity; and to ascribe social status to its members.

Without exception, each of these functions is now being challenged and changed under the impact of high mobility, new perceptions of sex roles, urbanization, industrialization, and rapid technological developments.

I mention all of this to underscore that in cultures such as ours, singleness is an option more than it used to be. What then does all of this have to do with church congregations such as ours?

To be single and a member of a Christian church has been both a good-news and bad-news story. The bad news may be most evident. Single adults frequently feel left out in many of today's congregations where so much activity, liturgical language, and educational material are "family" oriented. By "family," church congregations are not talking about the "family" of God, but a family made up of mother, father, and children.

Sometimes singles are considered to be less than whole persons since they are without partners. Some people still think that women are expected to derive their identities from men. A voluntarily single way of life to others sounds vaguely un-Christian, and the stereotype of "the swinging single" seems blatantly so. This can be bad news for those single adults who want to be fully involved in the life of the church.

The fact is, some church congregations seem not to know what to do with single adults, especially when singleness is a voluntarily chosen way of life and not a regrettable involuntary state because of a spouse's death. The very existence of the single person seems to question marriage as a normative assumption. If the individual is "on the way to marriage," he or she is seen as less of a problem.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, so much of some congregations' programs appear to be organized around a certain image of the family as a married couple, and the single adult is not a family person by that definition. Thus, he or she needs to be "adopted" to feel at home at the family-night supper. And when the image of the "family of God" is mentioned in worship, there is a nagging suspicion that those who conform more fully to the experience of the approved earthly family are more fully members of God's own family.

Still another reason that some churches have a problem with singleness is an inaccurate understanding of "self-love," as taught by Jesus. Scholars who have done research in the history of Christian doctrine tell us that at the time of the Reformation, Protestant theology, in an attempt to accent the splendor of God's undeserved grace, began to express an unfortunate dichotomy in its understanding of love. Any kind of self-love was frowned upon. The distinction between a proper kind of self-love and a selfish kind of self-love was forgotten. The emphasis was on a totally "selfless" kind of love, and its origin was in God. While the theologians did not draw the argument out in ways oppressive to single persons, the implication was there. If one must be loved in order to be whole, and if that love ideally comes from both divine and human sources, and if self-love is illegitimate for Christians, single persons are assumed to be deficient in their experience of love and wholeness — simply because they are without a spouse.

I said earlier that to be single and to be a member of a Christian congregation is both a good-news and bad-news story. Now for the good news.

First, in this matter of self-love, Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Sometimes we Christians have had a difficult time understanding the positive necessity and gift of self-love, a love that is fundamentally different from narcissism or selfishness.

With the help of both modern psychology and more careful theological reflection, we are beginning to realize that love is indivisible and nonquantifiable. It is simply not true that the more love one has for one's self, the less one will have for others. These are not viable alternatives. Jesus did not tell us to love our neighbors instead of ourselves, but as ourselves. Without experiencing a profound and genuine self-acceptance and a grateful affirmation of our own worth, it is very difficult indeed to genuinely affirm others. If we cannot say yes to ourselves, it is very difficult to say yes to another.

This understanding of love is good news for those who are married and those who are single, but it has a special significance for singles. Single adults may more frequently be thrown back on their own resources. The single person may need to cope more frequently with times of aloneness and perhaps loneliness.

The second part of the good news is this: in Christian theology, we are returning to a Biblical understanding of the human person as created in God's image. We are recovering from the dualism of the Greek influence in the early years of the church that tended to separate spirit and body, to a view of wholeness which includes the idea that a single person can be whole and still be single.

Without in any way denigrating the richness many find in marriage, we can affirm as Christians that no individual absolutely needs another of the opposite gender in order to be complete. To assume this would do injustice both to God and to human nature. God created both male and female in God's image. Now we also know that each one of us possesses both masculine and feminine qualities.

Our faith teaches that God embraces both genders as well as transcends them. As we become more accustomed to the richness of female and feminine metaphors for God as well as male and masculine ones, we will become more fully human in our own androgynous capacities.

To put it another way, from a Christian point of view, being single and remaining so is as much a natural state for individuals as being married. Neither is more approved as far as God is concerned.

It is significant that we have a model in Jesus who was both single and whole. Other well-known New Testament individuals who remained single were the Apostle Paul, John the Baptist, Mary and Martha who lived with their single brother Lazarus, and no doubt Mary Magdalene.

The scripture reading for today was the story of a woman described by Luke as a sinner, who came into the house where Jesus was the guest of a Pharisee, and anointed his feet with special ointment and then dried his feet with her hair. I think this woman was single. Why she was called a sinner by Luke, we do not know. We do know that Jesus accepted her, affirmed her, and forgave her.

The third part of the good news for singles is this: the grace of God. In the Christian faith, grace is the first word and the last word. God's unconditional acceptance of us is traditionally known as "justification by grace." God's Spirit within us, enabling new growth and wholeness, is traditionally called "sanctification by grace."

God’s grace means we are accepted and loved by God in whatever condition we find ourselves — single, married, divorced, widow or widower. We also know that God has created us as individuals with a continual capacity for new growth and that our church congregations can grow and change for the better. Our congregation’s growing ”singles ministry” is an example of this.

I want to end this sermon with a personal note. As one who has been married for almost 44 years, I have few unique credentials to give a sermon on singleness. However during my ministry in this congregation for almost 27 years, I have been challenged by the strength, the vulnerability and the creativity of our many church members who are single. My consciousness has been raised so much so that I deeply want this church to be an even more inclusive and enriching community for all.

In addition, I have discovered that single Christians have an important witness to those of us who are married. Singles can remind others that no relationship, however religiously and legally sanctioned, no matter how many years duration, will be life-giving when there is not the strength of individuality in each of its partners.

When love’s bonds become stifling and enslaving, then what once promised life begins to deliver death. Singles can remind the married that there is no one form of life to which everyone is called. Rather there are many different patterns and ways of life which need to be woven into the tapestry of our Christian community. Amen.