

Live Strong: Be a Strong Single

This is the second message in a three-part series on living strong in marriage, singleness, and parenthood. The entire series is available at GrowWithSecond.org.

**A Sermon Preached by
Jeffrey W. Gibelius, Pastor
Second Presbyterian Church,
Carlisle, Pennsylvania**

February 20, 2011

Listen for the word of God, especially as it applies to single people of all kinds:

Sing, O barren one who did not bear; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married, says the LORD.

Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread out to the right and to the left, and your descendants will possess the nations and will settle the desolate towns.

Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the disgrace of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. For the LORD has called you like a wife, forsaken and grieved in spirit, like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off, says your God.

Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." For thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

*These I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for **all** peoples. Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you.*
Isaiah 54:1-6, 56:3-5, 56:7-8, 54:10 NRSV

Before we look more closely at what the Bible says about singles, we need to confront what the *world* says about singles. There are several myths out there about singles and today we are going to bust a few of them.

Myth #1 – Singles lead lives of unfettered freedom, that’s why they’re called “Swingin’ singles.” All you have to do is ask a single person about this stereotype and most likely they’ll say, “I have no idea who they are talking about.” Most singles – remember this group includes singles of all ages, including single parents, widows, widowers, and people who have been divorced – have many serious responsibilities that keep them focused, if not tied down. And singles often have less support to carry out those responsibilities. To be single doesn’t mean that a person is free of commitments to God, work, friends, family, and others. And yes, while singles may have more freedom to travel, finding a companion to fill that double occupancy room can be hard. Yes, singles can eat dinner out every night, but it’s often less fun doing that alone. Being single can be frustrating in a world built for couples. Freedom often feels better when shared.

Myth #2 – Singles lead lonely lives of quiet desperation. How does the old song go? “One is the loneliest number...” The truth is most singles are happy. They do feel lonely from time to time, but so do most married people. Sad singles might well have been sad married people, too. Much depends on whether a person is single by choice or by circumstance, and whether a single person has worked hard to shape a whole life for themselves. We need to remember, too, that not all single people live alone. My sister is single but she has a full household of kids. Many seniors in our congregation are single but they live in wonderful communities where meals are shared and, indeed, whole lives are shared. Being single is not a curse – it’s an opportunity – to focus, to pursue interests and callings, and to grow more deeply with God.

Myth #3 – Deep down, single people want to be married. The truth is there are plenty of reasons why many single people choose to be single.

- They prefer solitude.
- They had a bad experience with marriage.
- Marriage was never part of their “life dream.”
- Their vocation doesn’t lend itself to marriage – they’d be cheating their spouse.

A 2006 Gallup poll revealed that 68% of divorced or widowed Americans plan to remain unmarried. *Some* singles are searching for Mr. Right or Ms. Right, but many have concluded that they can live perfectly faithful and whole lives on their own. And they are right. Not every person is called to marriage. Marrying for the wrong reasons – which include, “Because I felt like I should; all my friends were getting married; I couldn’t think of a reason not to” – only leads to heartache for everyone involved.

Myth #4 – There must be something wrong with a person if they aren’t married and want to be. I saw an ad for a dating website the other day. The teaser line asked, “Still single?” Then came the follow-up: “You shouldn’t be.” There are all kinds of things wrong with this ad. Can you hear the double-meaning? One message is “You don’t have to be single if you don’t want to be. We can help.” Another message is that being single is something to “get over” as quickly as possible. As in “still infected with small pox? You shouldn’t be. Take this pill.” And what’s with the “*still*” part of the question? Singles: the next time a married person asks you, “*Still* single?” ask them, “*still* married?” and see how they respond.

The ad was put out by a company called “Plentyoffish.com.” The company name implies that there are multiple great options for every person looking. Not so. The Census Bureau tells us that, there are only 88 single men for every 100 single women. Those odds aren’t great. And for some people it’s even harder. A friend of mine went on Match.com looking for Mr. Right. She is bright, funny, faithful, and has a great job. She’s also a little over two feet tall and gets around in wheelchair. Every time she put her height and weight into the Match.com profile it replied politely with “No appropriate matches found.” There might be plenty of fish, but apparently there is a shortage of men looking for minnows. Plenty of people haven’t found a fitting companion, and it’s not their fault. Let’s stop blaming them. Sometimes things just don’t work out the way we hope they will.

Myth #5 -- It’s “normal” to be married. Yes, more adults in America are married than are single, but the truth is that most households are headed by single people (2010 Census) and most people spend a larger portion of their lives as singles than they do as a married person. We’re waiting longer for marriage and we’re living longer after widowhood or divorce. We all need to be prepared to

live as faithful singles at some point in our lives. More and more adults are single—for all reasons; it’s the new normal. Our congregation is no exception. I estimate that about one-third of the adults in the congregation are not married. Being single is a part of the Christian life. With God’s help it can be a truly blessed part of life; different from being married, and every bit as sacred to God.

Myth #6 -- (The last one) -- All singles are alike. The truth is we can’t lump all single people together. There are huge differences between singles who are divorced, widowed, never married but wanted to be, and never married but probably will be. Single parents are different than singles without kids. And the age of single-hood matters, too: a widower in his thirties is going to needs that differ from one in his 80s.

It’s time we changed the way we think about singles. We don’t want to glamorize the single life or stigmatize it. Singles don’t like to be stereotyped any more than married people do, and they don’t want to be pitied. What they do want is acceptance and inclusion in every aspect of life, including church life. Isn’t that what all of us want?

Some of our attitudes about singleness come from the Bible. In Old Testament times marriage was expected of all adults. There were practical and spiritual reasons for this. Remember, there were no pensions, social security, life insurance or health insurance. You needed a spouse and children for support in your old age. Otherwise who would care for you? Remember the passage I shared last week from Ecclesiastes: “Two are better than one; if one falls, his friend can pick him up; woe to one who falls and does not have another to help.” [Ecclesiastes 4:9] I know that verse sounds like the old Lifeline ad: “I’ve fallen and I can’t get up.”] There’s obvious truth behind this verse and the ad: we need each other. That’s why single people, such as widows, lived as part of large extended families in order to survive in Old Testament times. Committed companionship was a practical necessity.

Marriage also filled a spiritual need. It says in Genesis, “a man shall leave his mother and father and cling to his wife.” In Old Testament times this was seen as not just a *description* of what happens in marriage but a *prescription* for marriage—as if God commanded all people to marry. The next command that people found in Genesis was to “be fruitful and multiply.” Kids were seen as the key to eternal life. In Old Testament times many Jewish people assumed that physical death was literally the end; there was not yet a strong appreciation of the immortality of the soul. If you wanted to “live forever” you did it by getting married and having kids, lots of them. Your name lived on through your children, grandchildren, and so on through the generations. To be a woman or a man and never married was a source of shame and embarrassment in a day when parents

would give money (i.e. dowries) for their children to be married. [See e.g. Gen. 24:61 and 34:12]. Single people, especially those without children, were seen as forgotten by God.

But then Isaiah came along. In our first lesson, he offered a burst of hope to single women and men. He told them: God will give you an eternal name and a rich legacy of descendants. He reassured single women that they were not alone: God would be their spouse, their provider, and their protector. He promised single men that God would give them something even better than kids, an everlasting name that would never be forgotten. Isaiah said you don't need to be married to be part of God's covenant of eternal life; there's hope for all people who trust God, both married and single.

By Jesus' day attitudes about singleness hadn't changed much, despite Isaiah's promise. There was still a strong expectation of marriage – for the same practical and spiritual reasons.

Jesus challenged that expectation in powerful ways through his example and teachings. Consider the disciples. All of them were single as far as we can tell; Peter was likely a widower. Consider who Jesus' friends were. All single people – Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Mary Magdalene. He taught them, helped them, healed them; but never once did he try to set them up on a date. Apparently he didn't think that match-making was as important as kingdom-building. Consider Jesus' own life. He was single. Surely that shows that the single life can be a blessed one. Jesus spoke of a person's primary relationship as being with God, not with spouse, parents, children, or siblings. Jesus said that through faith whole new families are created, families not dependent upon marital status, but upon obedience to God and God's will. [Mark 3:33-35]

That's why St. Paul can come along (in our second lesson) and speak of getting married and singleness in kind of an ambivalent way. He's writing to the church at Corinth in the same letter where he expounds so eloquently on the nature of love [I Corinthians 13]. But in this part of that letter he sounds like Dear Abby or your bachelor uncle dishing advice:

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is well for a man not to touch a woman." But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind. ...

In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God. Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that, in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that.

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, ... I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. ...

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his fiancée, ... Let them marry. But if someone stands firm..... he will do well. So then, he who marries ... does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better. ...

1 Corinthians 7:1-2, 7, 17, 24-40 (excerpts)

So what is Paul's advice for singles and married people? *Live the life to which you were called.* This past week one married woman in our congregation told Kari, "If Jeff makes a good enough case for being single on Sunday, I might try it." No. Married people shouldn't leave their spouses just because they've become a Christian. I think Paul would go on to say that our marital state -- and even issues of human sexuality -- shouldn't be the first thing on our minds. He believed that Christ was coming soon. We do, too. Our relationship with Christ has to be number one. Our marital condition, while personally interesting, is eternally irrelevant for Christians. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free. [Galatians 3:28] And, I would add, neither married nor single. Your relationship status on Facebook is one important aspect of who you are; it is not, however, your entire personhood before God.

The ancient practical and spiritual reasons for marriage are addressed in Christ. For Christians our security is in Christ and in the fellowships we have forged as brothers and sisters in Christ. In the church we find provision and protection as members of an ageless family. And our Christian hope for eternal life is grounded not in the abundance of our children but in the abundance of God's grace. We live on through faith in Jesus, not through our kids.

The church has largely ignored what Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul taught about the single life. Too often we have treated singles as second-class Christians and ignored their needs. Let's change that.

A word for singles in the congregation today: God doesn't think any less of you because you are not married; God doesn't think any more of you because of that either. It's the life to which you are currently called; nothing more and nothing less. Be faithful in that calling. It's ok to want to be married and not be. It's ok to not want to be married at all. Either way you can make the most of this time in your life by serving God faithfully, pouring your whole self into that work.

A word for married people in the congregation today: God doesn't think any more of you because you are married; God doesn't think any less of you because of that either. It's the life to which you are currently called; nothing more and nothing less. Be faithful in that calling. Love your spouse like God does. Single people may need your help with certain aspects of life, just like you may need help from singles. Invite them to your next dinner party and maybe they'll help you set-up that brand new 42" flat screen T.V. you just bought. We need each other; let's work to grow in faith together.

Singleness and marriage are both callings from God: equally holy, equally blessed, and equally challenging. In whatever state you find yourself this morning, live a life worthy of the God who loves you more fully than any human can. Amen.

Dear Friend,

I hope you have been blessed by this message. You can request a free audio-tape or CD recording of this sermon by contacting the church office. We also have a complete sermon archive (including audio-files and PDFs) on-line at www.GrowWithSecond.org/sermons

Second Presbyterian Church is a thriving congregation celebrating over 175 years of service to God and God's people. It would be our joy to help you grow in faith, hope, and love. Please consider being our guest for Sunday worship at 8 or 10:30am. Children's Church and infant and toddler care are always provided.

Jeff Gibelius, Pastor

Second Presbyterian Church
528 Garland Dr.
Carlisle, PA 17013
www.GrowWithSecond.org
717-243-4571

© 2011 Jeffrey Gibelius

This sermon is intended for personal use and distribution. If you want to use it for anything else, I'd be honored. Just call for permission. No claims of absolute originality are made for this material. As one man said, "I churn my own butter, but I use milk from other men's cows."