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Texts: Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; 1 Corinthians 7:7-9, 32-35

Which Is Better: One or Two?

So which is it? Are two better than one as the writer of Ecclesiastes states? Or is it better to be single as Paul advises the Corinthians? The general theme this summer is relationships. Today the topic is singleness. Finally, a topic that I'm confident I know quite a lot about!

I have vivid memories of two weddings in which the passage from Ecclesiastes 4 was used. In one instance the bride and groom illustrated verse 12, a cord of three strands is not quickly broken, by braiding three strands of yarn while singing "Bind Us Together, Lord." This was a suitable recognition of their desire to make their relationship with God a central part of their marriage relationship.

In the other instance the wedding meditation was based on verses 9-12. The pastor repeated the phrase "two are better than one" over and over again. He pointed out how marriage provides reward, support, companionship, and safety. His implication was that these cannot be found in singleness. (At least that's how it sounded to me. That might not have been his intention.) While I completely supported (and still support) marriage in general, and the marriage of this couple in particular, I had to suppress the urge to get up and walk out of the service. If the point of these verses is that marriage is better than singleness or, more strongly, that marriage is good and singleness is bad, then I, a never married woman, want to have nothing to do with them.

But a further exploration of this passage reveals that it's about relationships in general, not marriage in particular. The writer of Ecclesiastes has a pattern of commenting on what he sees around him. In chapter 4 we find a series of *better than* sayings. *The dead are better than the living.*¹ *Those who were never born are better than both.*² *Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king.*³ *Two are better than one.*⁴

Also in chapter four the writer uses numerical comparisons. He compares *one* handful to *two* handfuls and *two* people to *one* person.⁵ His conclusion in verse 6 is that one handful with quiet is better than two handfuls filled with toil and chasing after wind. In this case one is better than two when the smaller amount represents something beneficial and the larger amount represents a burden.

In verses 9-12 the greater number gives the advantage: two are better than one. Two people can help each other by working together. Each person's work complements the other's efforts and therefore enables them to complete more tasks more efficiently.

It's almost certain that verses 10-12 focus on situations in traveling. There is safety in numbers while traveling. If one person encounters trouble, the other will be able to lend a

¹ Ecclesiastes 4:2

² Ecclesiastes 4:3

³ Ecclesiastes 4:13

⁴ Ecclesiastes 4:9

⁵ Ecclesiastes 4:6, 9, 11, 12

helping hand. If it gets cold, two people can keep each other warm. Two people can resist an attacker better than one person can.

Verse 11 – *if two lie down together, they will keep warm* – could be thought of as referring to a married couple, but in the context of travel, this is unlikely. The writer refers to any two people who lie together for mutual warmth. During the cold nights of Palestine, people kept themselves warm by building a fire or burning coals, but when this was impossible or inadequate, people often relied on the warmth of the human body by lying together under the same cover. A person by himself doesn't have this benefit.

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken was a common proverb in the ancient world. It is common knowledge that three strands provide more strength than one or two strands can provide. In this movement from two to three it may be possible the writer of Ecclesiastes is implying that two are not sufficient after all. If two people provide a real advantage, then three are even better. Companionship may operate in larger numbers than two. This idea connects well with a saying of Jesus about the value of community. *For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.*⁶

I've come to appreciate this passage from Ecclesiastes. The writer's message about the advantages of a life of cooperation, companionship, and friendship is good news for me as a never married woman as well as for the married persons in this world. It doesn't mean that I must be married in order to receive that advantage.

But what about Paul's message to the Christians in Corinth? It appears he's saying that it's much better to be single than to be married. That's not a message we hear very often from the pulpit. In my experience, Christians who quote widely from Paul to define family values and describe how families should be structured rarely use his words to honor singleness.

When reading Corinthians, we need to remember that this is a letter Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth. In this letter, he addresses issues that are causing divisions among them. He states his desire for them at the beginning of the letter. *I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.*⁷

In Chapter 7, he responds to specific questions the Corinthians had asked him in a letter they had written to him. In this chapter Paul talks about sexual intimacy in marriage, remarriage of widows and widowers, divorce, and singleness. His recommendation for singleness is specific to the immediate circumstances as Paul perceives them.⁸ He believes that Jesus Christ is returning very soon, in a matter of months or years. Given the shortness of time, it's better not to be married. Single people are free to do more work on the Lord's behalf before he returns.

A summary of Paul's responses to the Corinthians' questions in chapter 7 would include five points.⁹ Value the single and celibate life. Recognize the challenges of marriage. Affirm respectful and equal sexual intimacy in marriage. Consider the complex issues of divorce. Remember that serving God is more important than one's marital status.

Our Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective includes statements on the value of singleness. Article 19 begins this way:¹⁰ *We believe that God intends human life to begin in*

⁶ Matthew 18:20, *New International Version*..

⁷ 1 Corinthians 1:10, *New International Version*..

⁸ Dan Nighswander, *1 Corinthians: Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2017, p. 181.

⁹ Nighswander, p. 191.

¹⁰ <http://mennoniteusa.org/confession-of-faith/marriage/>

families and to be blessed through families. Even more, God desires all people to become part of the church, God's family. As single and married members of the church family give and receive nurture and healing, Christian family relationships can grow toward the wholeness that God intends. The next paragraph contains these sentences. *We hold that within the church family, the goodness of being either single or married is honored. We honor the single state and encourage the church to respect and to include single persons in the life and activities of the church family.*

I appreciate the fact that these sentences are part of our confession of faith. For the most part, the congregations I've been part of as an adult have lived out these words. I doubt that is the case for everyone who is unmarried and part of a Mennonite church.

But my appreciation for these words diminished slightly this week. In my paper copy of the *Confession of Faith*, Article 19 is titled "Family, Singleness, and Marriage." When I looked it up on Mennonite Church USA's website the week, the article was simply titled "Marriage." It makes me sad. I have to wonder why the change. (By the way, Mennonite Church Canada, with whom we share this confession of faith, uses the longer title.)

That's one very small part of my experience as a single woman in the Mennonite Church. In the remainder of my remarks, I want to tell you more about my life. While other single people in this congregation and beyond would have things in common with me, each of us experiences congregational life and life in general in different ways.

One way to tell you about my life, is to share part of a presentation I made during one of my seminary classes. The title of my presentation was: *Clergy Ethics: Implications for Single Pastors*. I began by acknowledging my specific circumstances: middle-aged, not young adult or senior; never married, not divorced or widowed; lifelong celibate, not sexually active; heterosexual, not any other classification; and Protestant with the possibility of marriage, not Catholic with vows of celibacy. As you can see, not all unmarried persons are alike.

When considering issues about finding a pastorate, I acknowledged that as single person, I had more flexibility. I could be open to all possibilities; no one was depending on me. I didn't have to worry about risks to anyone but self. I didn't need to be concerned about a location or congregation would affect other members of my household. I didn't need as much money to live on as a family does. Due to the generosity of my home congregation I left seminary without any debt. In theory, I could consider any location – anywhere in the country, anywhere in the world.

On the other hand, in some ways I had less flexibility than a married person. I had only myself to depend on. No other income. No other source of health insurance. No other help in retirement. No built in support system.

In some situations, women are paid less than men. Would this be true for me? Would there be options for a second job if I needed one? Here again, I had an advantage. Due the generosity of my parents, I was receiving some of my inheritance while they were still living.

It's likely I would have fewer choices of a pastorate a man would, and maybe even fewer than a married woman would. Some congregations don't want women. Some congregations prefer a pastor with a family. The general assumption is that a pastor will be married and have a family

Some may be suspicious of a never married woman. What's wrong with her? Does she have trouble relating to someone else? Is she a lesbian? If so, what would that mean for the congregation? In any case, aren't all unmarried people searching for a spouse? How will this affect our congregation? Do I want the unmarried minister to spend time with my spouse? Do I want the unmarried minister to spend time with my child?

However, in some areas, my age and even marital status might work in my favor. Perhaps a congregation would perceive me to be more settled and less likely to be looking for a spouse. Maybe I could be more imaginative in ways of helping singles feel included. Of course, I would need to deal with own feelings of exclusion or discomfort at family nights, family retreats, and celebrations of marriage or coupledness. I certainly would be more aware of the subtle ways single people are excluded from church life.

Those are some of the issues I wondered about as I considered finding a pastorate. Of course, we know how my search turned out. I was welcomed to Salina Mennonite. My marital status has not seemed to be an issue for the congregation.

Let me share a few more observations and questions I have as a single, woman pastor, acknowledging again that my experiences as an unmarried person are not necessarily the same as they are for someone else, and that married persons face some of the same things as I do.

It took a lot of energy to move by myself to a new state, to a place where I knew no one. I'm glad I did it; I don't want to do it again.

Almost every decision I make about my car or my house is up to me. I hesitate to ask for help: out of pride – I should be able to figure it out for myself; out of consideration, probably unnecessary consideration, for other people's time -, I don't want to bother someone else; or out of embarrassment – I don't want anyone to know the bad decisions or stupid mistakes I've made.

I'm alone both at work and at home, except for my dog. I'm often alone, but not usually lonely. It's been important to find ways to connect with people, within and outside of this congregation. I wonder about how to assert independence and self-sufficiency without being individualistic and self-centered.

I think about boundaries. Boundaries of relationship: Is it appropriate to be alone with a man from this congregation in this building, at my house, or traveling to an event? Boundaries of physical touch: Where does a single pastor go for a hug? Boundaries of time: Pastors are expected to include family time in their schedule. What's a legitimate reason for me to say no to a ministry or service opportunity?

I wonder about counseling someone about things I've never experienced. I think about the experiences I've missed. Someone choosing me to be their life partner. The intense love a mother has for her child. I've also avoided the pain that comes from broken relationships or the loss of a child. Most of the time I'm content; sometimes I intensely grieve missing out on marriage and motherhood. I wonder who will care for me when I'm unable to care for myself.

I celebrate that fact that I'm part of a loving, extended family; that I'm pastor of a supportive congregation; and that I have friends in this community and beyond. One is enough; two are better; a community of family and friends is the best. Thanks be to God.