

Becoming a Faithful Community

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Date: 19 March 2023

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture lesson is from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 19, verses 1-12, as printed in the liturgy.

A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew. When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, Haven't you read, he replied, that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, Why then, they asked, Did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?

Jesus replied, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard, but it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman, commits adultery.

[1 : 39] The disciples said to him, If this is a situation between a husband and wife, is it better not to marry? It is better not to marry. Jesus replied, Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given.

For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others. And there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.

This is the Gospel of the Lord. We praise you, Lord Christ. Good morning, Christ Church. Today is one of those Sundays where it's just easy to be a preacher.

You know, you just kind of mail in the sermon. Not a lot of thought, not a lot of work, not a lot of prayer. Because in our Gospel text today, Jesus weighs in on some light topics.

Like marriage, divorce, remarriage, singleness, sexuality, gender, sexual immorality, adultery. Right? So, should be fun. Should be fun.

[2 : 41] I know these issues for us are personal. They're sensitive. They're serious. They're even controversial. And of course, this is not, you know, only about issues. It's about real people.

It's about things that affect everybody in this room and people who are not in this room, who we love and who we care about. Our parents, our siblings, our kids, our friends, our neighbors, our coworkers.

I feel inadequate to address this topic. And I feel a little bit nervous because the last few times we've preached on this topic, it's caused some tension and conflict.

And texts, emails, conversations that I kind of file away in the not fun category of pastoral ministry. But perhaps you're more nervous than me because these issues cause you to feel immense pain and sadness or intense shame and guilt, either for things that we've done or for things that have been done to us, ways that we've been wronged.

Some of us are here today, we're lonely because we are longing for marriage. Some of us are lonely because we feel stuck in hard marriages. Some of us are here with stories of failed marriage.

[3 : 50] Some of us are here today with addictions and secrets. Some of us are here today, we identify as same-sex attracted or gay. And the church has not been a safe place for you to talk about these things or even to be in church.

And if you're nervous, I just want to say I get it. And I want to encourage you, fear not. Open yourself up to God because God is here to meet you in His compassion, His kindness, His healing,

and His transforming power.

If you're here today and you're exploring the Christian faith, I want to say that, you know, what's most important for you, the first things that you should keep first is, is Jesus the Son of God? Did He die for your sins? Did He rise from the dead? And have you experienced His grace? And when you've dealt with those things, then you can get to the ethics of Jesus. But I am going to be talking today to Christians about ethics, and I hope it's helpful for you to overhear that conversation. And I want you to know that everybody here is broken on these issues, including me. I don't have it all together. The common ground I share with all of you is our need for wisdom about these issues. [4 : 59] And under no illusion that we all agree on these things. We're going to walk out of here today agreeing on these things, and that's okay. I hope it opens the door for you to, and for us together, to seek the mind of God on these things.

So that's my preamble. And here's my introduction, is that Jesus endorses God's vision of marriage in the Old Testament. We see in Luke chapter 2 that He obeyed His married parents. We see in John chapter 2 that He performed His first miracle at a wedding. We see in Mark chapter 1 that Jesus called a married guy named Peter to be the leader of His 12 disciples. So Jesus shares in this high and holy vision of marriage and the strict standard of sexuality that God revealed through the law, the prophets, and the writings, these three parts of the Old Testament.

So that when these Bible scholars come and they ask Jesus a question on marriage, how does Jesus respond? He says in verse 4, Haven't you read? Haven't you read? [6 : 05] They ask Him a question about marriage to trap Him in this hotly debated topic and declare which side He's on. And of course, Jesus does not answer their question, but He gets down to the root issue by saying, Haven't you read?

Or what He often says is, It is written. Or sometimes He'll say, Scripture cannot be broken. And when He says these things, He's appealing to a higher authority. He's appealing to the authority of God, the authority of God's Word, the authority of God's self-revelation and His character, His covenants and His counsels.

And that's why He takes us to pages 1 and 2 of the Bible. Now what about you? When you think about the issues of marriage, singleness, sexuality, and gender in our time, where do you go as your supreme authority?

Do you go to cultural authorities and then come and read the Bible through the lenses of our culture? Or do you go to God and to the Bible and you read our culture through the lenses of Scripture?

And that's what Jesus is doing here. He takes us to Genesis 1 and 2, the simple, beautiful vision of the meaning of human existence, the meaning of marriage that gets woven through all the Scriptures, till you get to the very end of the Bible, where you have this beautiful marriage, this joining together of heaven and earth, this joining together of Christ and His church in Revelation 21 and 22.

[7 : 35] And so it's from these inspired, infallible, authoritative Scriptures, the Word of God that Jesus speaks. And the Word that He speaks for us is that He builds His church on covenant marriage, on kingdom singleness, and on the grace gospel.

That Jesus builds His church on covenant marriage, kingdom singleness, and the grace gospel. We heard Jesus say a few weeks ago in Matthew 16, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

So we've been asking, well, what does He build His church on? And this is what He builds His church on. First of all, He builds His church on covenant marriage. If you look at verse 4, He says, Haven't you read that at the beginning, the Creator made them male and female?

And that's a quote from Genesis 1, 27. And Jesus is teaching that our Creator made one humanity that consists of two binary or dimorphic gendered opposites of male and female.

And in that next verse in Genesis 1, 28, He gives them their first command. And what is that? It's be fruitful and multiply. And that tells us that marriage is typically for the generation of new life and the procreation of children and their upbringing in the love and order of a family.

[8 : 54] And if you keep reading on, you get to Genesis 2, and it's kind of another angle on the creation story. And God says there, He says, It's not good for man to be alone. I'm going to make a helper or an ally suitable for him.

And that tells us that marriage is designed to be a friendship, a friendship between these allies that give each other mutual support and comfort. And then we get to this next verse that Jesus quotes in verse 5 where He says, For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.

Now that's a quote from Genesis 2, 24. And Jesus is teaching here that marriage exists in the eyes of God when that union is, first of all, an exclusive one-man, one-woman relationship, which is why it says man and wife.

Number two, that union is publicly acknowledged at a social event where the child-parent relationship is replaced by the husband-wife relationship, and that's what it means by leaves his parents.

Number three, that union is sealed by a permanent, lifelong covenant commitment of self-giving love, and that's what's meant by the words, cleaves to his wife.

[10:12] You swear, you make a promise that you're going to cleave, which means to adhere firmly or closely and loyally and unswervingly. And then what's the final ingredient for marriage in terms of how God defines it?

That the fourth thing is that it's consummated by sexual intercourse as a sign and a seal of that covenant, and that's what the language of one flesh means. This physical union is to be a whole life union that's emotional and spiritual and social and legal and a financial union.

So that's the definition of marriage. It's the nearest the Bible gets to a full definition of marriage, and Jesus affirms that definition. He's teaching us that marriage is not a human invention, but it's a divine institution, and that the Creator God's given us this gracious, loving provision for his very good creation before we fell away from God and before sin entered in and twisted the world.

And if you look at the larger context of creation in Genesis 1, you can see God taking these, causing all these diverse and unlike things to come together and create united dynamic wholes that generate more life and more beauty through their relationships.

So that by the time you get to the man and the woman, you can see that God's union of this male-female marriage is the climax of his creativity.

[11:48] And this marriage is the ultimate unity and diversity. It's the ultimate diversity and unity because men and women have unique, non-interchangeable strengths and glories.

Each of us can see and do things that the other cannot. And so God created this sexual union within this intergendered covenant of marriage as a way, not the only way, but as a major way for human beings to intermingle and mix together these special strengths and glories that we have.

And if you read the book of Song of Songs, you'll find that it's an entire book of the Bible that's devoted to this extended poetic meditation on this reality that I'm trying to describe.

And it's really a commentary on Genesis 2, verses 23 to 25. If you read through the law, the prophets, the writings of the Old Testament, God reveals that he desires to protect the liberty and the integrity of male-female marriages and their extended families, which is the basic social unit upon which God's covenant with his people depends.

Is this making sense? This is why Jesus says in verse 20, They shall no longer be two but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.

[13:23] It's a command from Jesus to protect these marriages that God has yoked, that God has fastened together. And if God has done that, then we should come around them and guard that union and strengthen the bonds of that unity.

Now, what does that mean for us, and how does it apply to our lives? Well, I think it means that the community of Jesus' disciples is called to uphold Jesus' doctrine of marriage and is called to live out Jesus' ethics of marriage.

And if you're here today and you've taken the great risk of becoming a husband or becoming a wife, you made covenant promises that you would, in the future, love and cherish that other person when things are either better or worse.

Whether you're experiencing being richer or poorer, or if things are in a season of sickness or in health. And the question for us today is, how's that going?

Are we honoring those vows that we made even when and if it hurts us? Are we cherishing that friendship that marriage is supposed to be? And are we investing the time that that friendship requires?

[14:39] Jesus tells us to cleave to your spouse. Are we adhering closely to one another as allies? Or are we just kind of coasting along and maybe even drifting apart?

Are we serving our spouse, encouraging our spouse, praying for our spouse in self-giving, sacrificial love and allowing our relationship to be a symbol and a signpost to God's cleaving and covenantal love for us?

Jesus says to us that we're to be one flesh. And the question is, are we giving not just our bodies, but are we giving our whole selves to one another in a whole life union?

Or are we holding parts of our life and parts of ourself back from each other? Are we giving each other a taste of Eden where we can be fully known?

And in being fully known, we can be fully accepted. Jesus says that, you know, what God has joined together, let no one separate. And the question for us is, are we protecting our relationships by keeping them utterly exclusive and absolutely unadulterated?

[15:49] Are we allowing other people and other things to drive a wedge in between us and pull us apart? Are we putting our kids rather than our friendship at the center of our marriage?

You know, are we continuing to say, till death do us part, 10 years in, 20 years in, 50 years in, the only thing that's going to pull us apart is death.

Now, I know there may be people here today and you're like, man, I'm struggling to find a spouse. I'm struggling in my marriage. I'm divorced. I'm widowed. Maybe you're remarried.

Maybe you're dealing with infertility or miscarriage or the loss of a child. And I want you to know you're not alone. And I want to encourage you not to allow yourself to struggle alone, to rather give this church community the opportunity to come around you with some love and some biblical wisdom about dating and engagement and what it means to be newlyweds and how to engage conflict and reconciliation, how to grieve the loss of a marriage or the loss of a beloved spouse or the loss of a desired child.

If you're married today and you think, or maybe even dating or engaged, and you think you'd benefit from having a marriage mentor or some marriage counseling, we'd love to give you some guidance and referrals about that.

[17:11] If you're looking for resources, I brought a whole stack of books. I'll put them on the communion table afterwards. Please don't take my books. But take a picture of my books. There's a great one on there called How to Avoid Falling in Love with a Jerk.

I recommend that to you. There's another one called The Defining Decade, How to Make the Most of Your 20s Now, as written by a woman who got her PhD here at Berkeley. Another one called Hold Me Tight that I didn't bring.

Catherine and I have been trying to read that for about 10 years. And we took it to England last summer and still haven't read it. So we hit our 20th anniversary this summer. Please ask us if we've read Hold Me Tight.

And are you holding one another tight? So I say this at every wedding that marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by God.

And the purposes of marriage, they're not a mystery. Jesus teaches us about those purposes, and we as his people, we need to learn what those are and hold them up and live them out.

[18:15] Amen? So Jesus builds his church on covenant marriage, but he doesn't just build his church on covenant marriage. He builds his church on kingdom singleness.

There might be half of the room in here today that's single. And these disciples, they're listening to Jesus, and they say in verse 10, they say, You know what? It's better not to marry. It's just better not to marry.

Because, Jesus, your vision for marriage is so high, and if we have to do marriage on your terms and not on our terms, man, it's better to be single and celibate.

And so Jesus responds to them in verse 11. He says, Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it's been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way.

Others have been made eunuchs, and others have renounced marriage or made themselves eunuchs because of the kingdom of heaven. And the one who can accept this should accept it. What in the world is Jesus talking about?

[19:13] I know it sounds strange, but I think it has deep cultural relevance for this moment that we're in. What is a eunuch? In the ancient world, a eunuch would guard the women's living areas of royal courts because they were castrated.

So a eunuch is somebody who's not going to get married, not going to have sex, not going to make babies. And Jesus is using this term to talk about himself and to talk about his single disciples.

And he says, I want you to see God's gift of the single life in three distinct modes. First of all, there are people that are born that way, which suggests nature and biology, heredity, you know, how we arrive genetically at birth from our mother's womb.

And Jesus says, some of my disciples are going to be single and celibate because they lack the capacity to sexually relate, either physically or mentally. And then what's the second category of single disciples Jesus mentions?

He says, there are those who are made that way by others, which suggests not nature, but nurture or our environment, the ways we've been damaged by our history, our relationships, our social forces, our experiences.

[20 : 23] He says, some are going to be single and celibate disciples because of abuse or abandonment or because they've been refused by desired partners or because they're divorced or because they're widowed.

And some other disciples, because they're not attracted to the opposite sex. If 5% of the general population is same-sex attracted, we should not be surprised that that percentage shows up in the church.

And it's been my honor and my privilege to journey with so many Christians over the past 20 years who on the one hand have experienced rejection from the church because they're same-sex attracted.

And on the other hand, they've experienced rejection from the LGBT community because of their decision to follow and obey Christ. And if that's you, I want to say that that double rejection is extremely painful from what you've told me and that you are most welcome in this church.

What then is Jesus' third category for single disciples? He says, there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God.

[21 : 24] Literally, they've made themselves eunuchs and that suggests choice or decision or volition or will based on your calling. This is a disciple who's moved by the call of God and the call of the kingdom of heaven to put sexual relations aside to give themselves fully to serve the Lord in a singular, undivided, undistracted, and devoted way.

And Jesus is calling us to honor that costly discipleship, to honor that kind of heroic obedience, to honor people who've committed themselves to this countercultural way of living.

Now, some of you, you sense this calling and you know it's a lifelong calling. And like Pastor John Stott, who was a lifelong single in London, England, he said of marriage, you know, I would rather want what I do not have than have what I do not want.

And that's your perspective on it as well. Some of you are hoping, you know, this is a temporary calling for you. You'd really like to get married. You're praying that God would provide a spouse for you who is a Christian, who Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 7 as somebody who belongs to the Lord.

But whether you're a lifelong single or a temporary single, you are bearing witness to something. You're bearing witness in our midst to the fact that there's something greater than the self and there's something greater than marriage to live for, and that is the kingdom of heaven and the king of that kingdom, King Jesus.

[23 : 03] Well, what does it mean to be a single person and live for the kingdom of heaven above all else? Well, look at Jesus. Jesus made himself a eunuch for the kingdom of God.

He never married, never had a romantic relationship, never experienced sex, and yet here is the greatest, wisest, most fully human and complete person who's ever lived.

And Jesus is setting aside all of his desires for those things in order to give himself fully to working and praying that the kingdom of God would come on the earth as it is in heaven.

And so Jesus is calling you as a single disciple to be complete and to be fulfilled in him and in his work. He's calling you as a single disciple to be a vital and essential member of the church, and he's calling you as a single disciple to use your capacity and your gifts to serve the king and his kingdom.

And you know, if this single man named Jesus launched and nurtured a disciple community and he started and sustained a ministry, God can enable you as a single person to do that as well.

[24 : 12] And you might say, well, I'm not the son of God. Well, okay, what about Paul, Barnabas, Timothy? What about Tabitha and Lydia and Phoebe and all of these single men and women we

meet in the New Testament who turn the Roman Empire upside down?

God is calling you to be that kind of person. Now, how did they turn the Roman Empire upside down? First of all, they lived with moral integrity. They knew that saying yes to Jesus as a single person means saying no to sexual autonomy.

And this is why Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6, he says, flee from sexual immorality. That means run as hard as you can in the opposite direction of sexual immorality.

And he says, do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you receive from God? You are not your own. You were bought at a price.

Therefore, honor God with your bodies. Now, that sounds ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous to a culture that's bowing down to worship, romance, and sex.

[25 : 28] To a culture that says, you know, do whatever you want with your body. Put no limits on your desires. You cannot be a full human being without sex. But here's a single disciple named Paul who says, you know what?

I don't belong to myself anymore. I'm not my own. I've been bought with the price of the blood of the Son of God and I'm filled with the Spirit of God, the Spirit of holiness.

See, if you say, you know, I choose to be single and celibate for the sake of the kingdom of God because the sovereign rule of my crucified king is better than romance and the supreme reign of my risen Lord is better than sex, you're going to sound crazy.

But Jesus sounded crazy and Paul sounded crazy. All of these New Testament Christians sounded crazy. Friends, God created sex to be enjoyed within male-female marriage where we can say to the other person, I belong to you completely and exclusively in a whole life permanent commitment. And if you're single and you're having sex with other people, you just can't say that. You can't say that. What you can say is, I give you my body but not my money. I give you my body but not my future.

[26 : 58] I give you my body but I don't give you my promise that when I get to know who you really are, I'm going to accept you and I'm not going to go anywhere and when all this chemistry wears off, I'm still going to be with you and even when this relationship isn't meeting my needs, I'm going to be your person.

You can't say that. You see, it's very difficult to be a genuine, authentic follower of Jesus Christ and to hold on to your moral integrity and to maintain a credible Christian witness if you're practicing serial monogamy with the potential spouses of other people.

That's the teaching of the New Testament. It's just very difficult to do that but here are these single disciples that I mentioned to you in the New Testament who committed themselves to the biblical sex ethic and they know that moral integrity means monogamous fidelity if you're a married disciple and celibate chastity if you're a single disciple whether you're opposite sex or same sex attracted. Now I know that not everyone believes that today. I know what I'm saying not everybody here believes.

If you don't believe this we are so glad that you're here and I want to invite you to prayerfully study the scriptures with us and consider Jesus' better way of sexual sobriety.

[28 : 28] The Apostle Paul in the same text in 1 Corinthians 5 he says, what business of mine is it to judge those outside the church? That's not what we're doing today. He says, but are we not to judge those inside?

Are we not to call Jesus' disciples to walk in his way and trust in his truth and live his life? And that's why they turned the Roman Empire upside down.

They lived with moral integrity and the second thing they did was they lived as a family. The primary metaphor of the church in the New Testament is of a spiritual family where God is our Father and Jesus is our elder brother and we are the siblings, the sisters and brothers of Christ who share in life together through the Holy Spirit.

And when you read Paul's letters you hear this familial love and mutuality and dependence that he has for his brothers and sisters and what they have for them. And as I read those it's a challenge to me and it should be a challenge to married people here who define family as only your spouse and kids.

because the New Testament calls us to look beyond our biological families to the larger spiritual family that's full of single disciples whether they're teenagers or whether they're in their 80s.

[29 : 43] And the question for us is are we opening our homes and having single people at our tables as part of our families? I know one married couple they come to church gatherings looking for those who have no one to sit with and they go and sit beside them.

Are we willing to do this kind of thing to be family for those who like Jesus have chosen to be single and celibate for the sake of the kingdom of heaven?

So Jesus builds his church on covenant marriage and on kingdom singleness. And I know I'm going a little longer today but I have one last thing I just have to say.

And that's that Jesus builds his church on the grace gospel. He builds his church on the grace gospel. What do I hear? What do I do when I'm hearing Jesus' high and holy vision for what it means to be a single disciple?

And I realize that in all my single years I fell short of that vision. When I read Paul's words to a single man named Timothy and he says, you man of God flee the concerns of this world and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness and I look back on my singleness and I say, man, I wasted time.

[31 : 01] I squandered my energy. I failed to discipline my desires. What do I do? Or what do I do when I hear Jesus' high and holy vision of married disciples and I realize how far short I fall?

He says in Ephesians 5, Paul says, husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that's not me. So often I find what Moses and what Jesus describes in this text is hardness of heart toward my spouse.

So often I find self-love rather than self-giving. I don't want to sacrifice myself or suffer in order that my wife might flourish. What do I do then?

Is anybody like me? You're like, man, I fall so far short of Jesus' vision for his disciples. Anybody feeling that today? I want to take you to a story in the Gospel of John chapter 8 because it shows us how Jesus relates to broken and condemned people.

And the story is this, that there's a man and a woman and they sin against God through a sexual relationship with one another that they're not married to each other.

[32 : 15] and that relationship wrecks their families. It brings shame on themselves, shame on their communities and these pious men, they come along and they want to take the shame of this woman in particular out into the public.

They say, well, she's broken the law of God and they've done this shameful act and they've engaged in this condemnable conduct. And you know, these guys, they're not wrong.

They're actually quite right about the word of God. But the problem is that they're full of truth but they're not full of grace. They're full of truth but they're lacking in grace.

And Jesus comes along and gets involved and he says, well, how about this? Let's let the one who is without sin be the first in line to condemn this person. And one by one, these men start to walk away and Jesus is left alone with her and he simply says to her two things.

He says, I do not condemn you. Now leave your life of sin. He says, I do not condemn you. Now leave your life of sin.

[33 : 20] And the order of those two sentences is absolutely crucial. If you reverse the order of those sentences, you lose the grace gospel and you lose Jesus himself. Jesus does not say, leave your life of sin so that I won't need to condemn you.

With Jesus, it's always grace first, love first, which establishes an environment in which we can have a conversation about morality and ethics. I do not condemn you.

Now leave your life of sin. It's not our repentance that leads to God's kindness. No. The apostle Paul tells us in Romans 2, he says it's God's kindness that leads to our repentance.

How can Jesus get away with not condemning this woman and this man and this couple? How can he get away with not condemning any of us today? Does he just play fast and loose with the scriptures?

Does he just disregard God's moral law? Does he just shrug his shoulders at our sin and say it's no big deal? No. Jesus knows that someone must be condemned and that's why he came from heaven to earth.

[34 : 32] On his way to the cross, Jesus is piling up on his shoulders all the selfishness in my marriage, all of the self-centeredness in your singleness.

He's piling up on himself all of our wrecked marriages, all of our infidelities, all of our addictions, all of our serial monogamy, all of our sexual immorality.

It's all getting piled up upon Jesus and there in our place and as our substitute, he stood condemned on his cross, bearing in his body our condemnation.
And friends, to be a Christian is to hear the crucified yet resurrected Jesus say to you, I do not condemn you. Now leave your life of sin.
I do not condemn you. Now leave your life of sin. Jesus is full of grace and he's full of truth and he wants us to create an environment like that in his church.
[35 : 43] We do not condemn you. We do not condemn you. Now let's have a conversation about God's law and ethics and obedience as his disciples.
let's talk about leaving our lives full of sin. Jesus is full of grace and truth and he wants a church that's full of grace and full of truth.
May God enable us to walk this very fine line following behind our Lord Jesus in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen. Amen.