



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Our Souls Find Rest in God Alone.”

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

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January 22, 2012

From now on, let all those who have wives be as though they had none. That sure is an interesting piece of advice, isn't it? Divorced entirely from its context, the passage evokes a certain chauvinistic “What Happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas” feeling, which will rightly earn more than a few disapproving looks. And while I can assure you that that impression is almost the exact opposite of Paul's direction here, taking a closer look at where Paul is coming from probably won't make his advice seem any more familiar to us. But before getting too far, it seems useful to broaden our literary context at least a little bit by reading what precedes and follows the text given to us in the lectionary. And though this section begins at the start of chapter seven, I'll pick up at verse twenty-five and read through to verse thirty-five:

“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, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

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. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.”

With that added context, we can begin to see why Paul might say that those who have spouses ought to act as though they had none. Paul is not focused here exclusively on marital relationships. For Paul, that is just one piece of a larger emphasis on being unattached to the things of this world, so that one can be completely devoted to God. We hear him calling on his readers to be unattached to this world whether the subject is marriage or mourning, rejoicing or possessions. Paul contends that a person is better without the worldly attachment than with it, and so, in this passage, encourages those who are as yet unmarried to remain in that state, and warns those that are not to become distracted from their service to God because of their marital obligations.

This is not because detachment from the world is an end in itself. Paul's instructions here have a rather obvious impact on daily life, but these instructions are informed by a theology that understands the world as quickly coming to an end. Paul understood the death and resurrection of Jesus as the beginning of a new age that hadn't yet fully arrived, but that would arrive shortly. On the one hand, the kingdom of God was present on the earth; on the other hand, the fullness of God's kingdom was still coming, and coming soon. God was thus in the process of re-creating

heaven and earth. Paul and many of the earliest followers of Jesus decided, then, to live a counter-cultural lifestyle as a demonstration to all that the world and the old created order were passing away. For many early Christians, this meant embracing celibacy and voluntary poverty, and enabled them to endure horrendous persecution.

That leaves us in a tough spot with a passage like 1 Corinthians 7, which is giving ethical instructions on how to live in a context where the present state of affairs is understood as quickly passing away. Because if that's where Paul is coming from, how does this scripture become the word of God for us, here and now? And why are we reading other people's mail to hear what God has to say to us? After all, Paul states openly that what's written here is his opinion, and nearly two thousand years have passed since Paul declared "soon" in this letter, which makes his apocalyptic the-end-is-near perspective difficult for us to relate to and even more difficult for us to believe

This is especially true in the United Church, which has embraced the prophetic view in the scriptures much more than the apocalyptic. The prophetic view might be summarized by saying that the world is far from perfect, and as the people of God it is our call to seek justice and resist evil by letting God challenge us, and leading us to challenge the social structures of our world. In some ways, the apocalyptic view that the world is soon coming to an end is seen as an impediment in this task because it can lead to inaction on important long-term problems. For instance, if the world is passing away soon, why worry about future problems with the environment, or the accumulation of either individual or societal debt.

For some, it is then tempting to dismiss this passage and others like it out of hand. I would suggest that such an attitude is decidedly wrong-headed. Our weekly declaration that these texts are the Word of God is made meaningful in our community, not by a literalistic interpretation of each text in isolation wherein we must believe, underlying worldview and all, exactly what is written, but by recognizing and acknowledging the tensions in scripture, and letting the texts become the Word of God to us as we discuss their content in sermons, in study, and even over coffee. We let these texts become the Word of God as we come together and listen for the Spirit. That coming together is not limited to the people in this room. We also listen to how the Spirit spoke to those who came before us, and especially to the apostolic forerunners of our faith, acknowledging that sometimes a completely different worldview may yet have something very important to teach us. The scriptures, the Spirit, and the community of believers all work together to help us in hearing God's voice.

With this week's text, we would do well to listen carefully because we find a particularly useful corrective to the values of our culture, values that tell us that life is about anything but our relationship with God. It's about that special someone, about looking at what others have and lusting after it, about having as much fun as you possibly can, about collecting possessions, or money, or experiences. And as for any residual religious impulses that we might have? Well, they would be best given over to the Canucks.

Paul reminds us in this passage that God is at the center of our lives. He reminds us that the relationships most important to us, though beautiful, will one day end; that the things we collect, though useful in their time, will one day rust; and that the feelings we get from all of our most incredible experiences, though exhilarating, will one day pass. This is a reminder for us that our place in this world is fragile, and that there is something beyond this world in which we find hope. As the psalmist says and as we sang today, our souls find rest in God alone; we are reminded that, whether or not we embody the ethics that accompany a world quickly coming to an end, the one thing on which we can always depend is God's promise to be with us in life, with us in death, and with us in life beyond death. Thanks be to God.