

Blessed Are the Single Ladies: How Marriage Normativity Hurts the Church

Written by Rev. Dr. Jamie Fiorino, December 2024

The first time I became aware of how the church treats single women, I was 28.

A friend was holding a fundraiser dinner at a neighboring church on Valentine's Day. It was a plated dinner and talent show, so I was already emotionally preparing for hearts and doilies and googly-eyed teenagers serving all the married people and me—a single woman. I went to buy my ticket and the church secretary refused to sell a single ticket; I had to buy a pair. After all, I was told, it was a couples' dinner.

Unable to find anyone to join me, I went by myself and (thankfully) was seated at a table of people I knew with the empty place setting I had also purchased next to me. Just before service started, one of the volunteers came over and took the chair and silverware saying it was needed at another table. And that's how I spent Valentine's Day—at a church function sitting with three married couples and a giant sinking hole of nothing next to me. Two hours of romantic love songs, cold pasta, and a competition for the table with the most years married. My table lost.

I've had to endure plenty of other marriage normative experiences in the church—too many to list here—but mine is not the only story of the inadvertent message delivered to single women from pulpits every Sunday and broadcast in church programs: you are worth less than married people. I've been studying this phenomenon for the last three years; the stories and statistics are staggering. The church causes harm with an insistent message that marriage is normal and expected of all people. A funny thing happens when people find out what I'm researching. Single women—never married, dating, divorced, separated, widowed, and those who attend without a partner—have the same reaction of delight. "Finally," said Jasmine. "Someone sees me." But it is married men (in both mainline and evangelical circles) who have the biggest pushback to this idea of marriage normativity. "I don't buy it," said a colleague. "Maybe you're projecting a bit?"

Not all men, of course. My doctoral mentor and my project faculty are both married men who have leaned into this idea that they carry a blind spot. While on retreat, my doctoral program cohort sat through a church service at a rural, conservative community church. We entered to a giant projected picture of a couple walking down the beach at sunset, the word REPENT blasted across the top of the image. What message was the church trying to send there? The next day I was discussing marriage normativity with my mentor and he asked for more examples, so I mentioned how annoyed I was by that picture. He saw nothing wrong with it, but, to me, the implication was that I needed to repent because I was, at best, jealous of the couple and, at worst, sinful for wanting more in my life. He was quiet for a moment and then said, "I think I need to talk with my [church's] communication team and change some images we use in slides." Since then, every time we meet in person, I get an update on the progress made for single people in his huge nondenominational church in central California.

Because he humbled himself to examine the flaw in his understanding of singleness, the unmarried folks of his church benefit.

Examples of marriage normativity and it is everywhere in the church. Jesus never said blessed are those who are married, yet the church behaves as if he had. We have been taught that to be single is to be avoided, that it is better to be married, and that it is better even to be in a bad marriage than to be single. The twisting of scripture so that marriage is normalized as the desired state for all Christians may be accidental, but this careless message is found in mainline and conservative churches alike: you are more blessed married than you are single.

The US Census tells us that the median age for marriage is 28.4 years old. Not coincidentally, a new study from the UK says that it is around the age of 30 that singles begin to feel that the church stops caring for them, instead turning that loving gaze toward families and newly-marrieds. The mainline church's obsession with marriage (Bella DePaulo calls it "matrimania" in her 2006 book *Singled Out*) is perpetuated with the help of sermons that exclude single people, if not purposefully, then ignorantly.

Church-taught singlism (also a DePaulo term for the system of societal stereotyping and discrimination of single people) forces Christians to accept the cultural bias that the married state is better than single. The roots of this lie begin in a misinterpretation of Jesus' teaching on marriage in both Matthew and Mark. Jesus explains to the crowd that God only allowed divorce because of the hardness of the husband's heart. Instead of teaching how to end a marriage, Jesus rewinds to the beginning and tells men to soften their hearts in marriage, as befitting one flesh.

Paul writes to the Corinthians with the passion of a man certain that Jesus is coming back any minute now so our work should be on building God's kingdom, not building a family. Part of that work is to be a good role model for pure living, and if you can't stay single and celibate then get married, Paul writes, because it is better to be married and a sexual being than to be single and "burn with passion." Patriarchal fathers ran with that idea saying singleness was an "unnatural state" because singles can't control their desires. The result is that today's church carries forth this heresy as normative, rather than celebrating a life of singleness or allowing singleness to be a gift.

Really, it is not so off-base to say the church is obsessed with marriage. Even in the pulpits of progressive churches, pastors often rely on sermon illustrations from their own lives about their spouse or family that reinforce marriage is better than singleness. I once heard a guest preacher at a left-of-center Presbyterian church give a sermon that was ostensibly on the Hebrews fleeing Egypt. "Marriage saved my life," he said, and then went on to talk about how his wife brought him back into the church and because of her ministry to him, he is where he is today. He went on to tell a story about how his son-in-law was greeted at the first family dinner when he was dating the preacher's daughter. He reiterated that without a spouse, we can drift away from a relationship with God. He ended with another story about his family, concluding that "Marriage saves us from a life apart from God."

His illustrations and conclusions were not tied to the text in any discernible way and I was left to conclude that I—a still never-married woman—cannot be saved until I am married. I cannot know God any better until I a man “puts a ring on it” and we can have this kind of typical Sunday night dinner. Is that what he meant? Probably not, but he gave me no other examples to draw me into the text. That is marriage normativity.

A sermon is a powerful tool for communicating the love, grace, and discipline of God; it is not to be taken lightly or lazily. But it comes with a conundrum for all pastors. How to abridge dense theology, lengthy church history, foreign context, and obscure languages within their church’s culture into enough content that the average pew sitter will leave remembering something in less than 30 minutes? A powerful sermon can change culture and influence people, if the people retain the sermon’s key points. The go-to technique for giving congregants handles to remember the theological point is a memorable story. So, under a time crunch, pastors dip into the safe pool of family stories.

But even a memorable story isn’t enough to overcome the culture of a church so focused on marriage. My non-denominational friend, Mary, also heard that “marriage saves lives” sermon. She compared that marriage-forward attitude to walking around the streets of a foreign country:

“Having spent my entire adult life as a Christ-following, single woman, sitting through countless sermons where marriage references and analogies are frequently used, I have found that my brain has tried to do similar acrobatics as when I have lived in other non-English speaking countries. I cannot fully comprehend marriage, as I have never lived it, but my brain tries with all its power to translate the words, phrases, and stories in a way that will make sense to my life. Here and there, it is not a big deal. But 25-plus years of it adds up and it is exhausting. Most of the time, I just check out.”

Mary doesn’t go to church in person, she watches online. The biggest reason is because she feels judged and criticized for sitting alone in a pew, even if the church deacons offer spectacular hospitality or someone invites her to join them. The marriage normative message is soaked into the DNA of many churches: promotional material features white, hetero couples; songs about the Bride of Christ; programs geared toward families or married couples; even the post-worship hour has tables set for pairs of people. So steeped and blinded is the church—mainline and evangelical, conservative or liberal—that single women need a guided translator to see Jesus through the haze of marriage normativity.

Mary’s best friend, Erica, is a divorced mother of three who also watches online because of the disorientation caused by the church’s obsession with marriage. “Even though I am now in the ‘divorced’ group, I was a woman who attended church with her children alone for many years,” she told me. “What I need—now and then—is an advocate for single women and their relationship with the Christian church; a place where all single women can feel seen. And I just don’t get that in person.”

Changing the marriage normative culture in ways such that Mary, Erica, and others feel seen in their individual congregations begins in the pulpit. Preachers who are unaware of the damage caused by the intensity and volume of marriage normative language they use in sermons peddle—intentionally or indirectly—the message of otherness and failure to single women. But what if the resources preachers use to be better sermon writers is also pushing a culture of marriage expectations?

At a preaching conference, I attended a seminar on preaching as an act of racial reconciliation. I stopped counting the speaker's marriage normative examples at 25, and he was only 30 minutes into his one-hour lecture. Deploying cliches like "happy wife, happy life," he used marriage as an example of a fundamental aspect of society that has been affected by the patriarchy. Another keynote speaker, a UCC pastor, drew on his initial sermon illustration—coaching his 9-year-old daughter's basketball team—throughout the 45-minute sermon. "God is mother to the motherless, father to the fatherless, spouse to the singles, and fulfillment to the marrieds," he said at one point.

While it is theologically powerful to acknowledge that we—as humans—are shallow vessels without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, it is another thing to imply that a woman is incomplete without a partner. This message of "God as husband to the single woman" reinforces the deeply internalized belief based on years of lived experience in the church that she is not enough. This is why single women are leaving the church.

The exclusion of single women from the church only amplifies the aloneness we feel, regardless of whether or not we want to be married. A normalization of marriage further isolates those who are divorced or separated or whose spouses have died. Typically, the largest demographic in a congregation will be single women (in all the ways defined here), yet they have the least amount of budget allocated to their spiritual formation, very little representation in the decision-making process, or a voice from the pulpit or in front of a class of adults. When there is no representation or way for them to voice their frustration, singles can be left with a profound sense of emptiness, of being without.

"When that aloneness, that singleness, is magnified by a statement – within a sermon, or from scripture or even in an announcement – that implies marriage is normal and even a blessing from God, it makes me wonder, why do I even bother?" said my Presbyterian friend, Keisha, echoing millions of single voices. She was reacting to an announcement in church that the Bible study held on the only night of the week she had available for her spiritual enrichment was looking for a married couple. Only a married couple. And she is left to wonder: why bother?

Listen, I am not so jaded as to assume every single woman is opposed to hearing about marriage in a sermon. By not talking about marriage and relationship at all, pastors cut out hope and accessibility for those who do love being married, who fondly remember a spouse now gone, who are inspired by godly marriages. The key is to develop a sensitivity to who is left out of the story-telling; Jesus certainly didn't and neither should a Jesus-following pastor.

My research shows that single women want to be seen and heard in their spiritual homes but have been made to feel inferior, but they also won't go ask for it. I have three suggestions for pastors who want to make the first steps toward a single-friendly church. First, what is the harm in forming a small group of single women (in all the ways defined here) specifically to hear their experiences in the church? Listen to the difficulties of being single in the 21st century—the decision fatigue, advocating for themselves by themselves, coming to church and sitting alone in the pew or trying to find someone to talk to while eating a doughnut after worship, wanting to go to all the church events but don't for fear of being the weird one there alone. Ask them what they love about being single, too, and how your church can celebrate milestones in their lives.

Secondly, ask single people to keep track of marriage normativity creeping into your sermons. Have them count the times you use dating, your family (specifically your spouse), or celibacy as examples to make your point. It might be more than you think, so be prepared to receive their point of view with humility.

Last, and this is advanced levels, you can use your platform to address marriage normativity head-on. When breaking down a Bible passage that has nothing to do with relationships, lift up the pain caused when a church is obsessed with everyone being married. For example, when talking about how Jesus came to save the least and the last and the lost, among other examples, you can talk about how this culture wants to make single women sound like sad sacks in need of being saved. However, our salvation is not dependent on our marital status or how many swipes we get on a dating app. Our salvation is in Christ alone who does not see singles as the least, the last, or the lost.

The goal of countering marriage normativity from the pulpit is to have healthier congregations wherein single women aren't reduced to an afterthought or a punchline; rather, they are recognized as beloved members of Christ's church. By choosing to hear them and know her story, you encourage the single women in your congregation to know their worth in Jesus not for their relationship status but because they belong to him. And by weeding out the marriage normative language from your sermons, you are inviting the whole church to join Jesus in saying, "Blessed are the single ladies."

Blessed Are The Single Ladies is my final DMin project from Portland Seminary through George Fox University. The title is an homage to Beyonce's classic "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)", a powerful song of independence and the strength of womanhood in community. I deeply believe that it should not be played at weddings when the bride throws a bouquet; to use it in that way is pandering and, frankly, insulting. A graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary and University of Idaho, I am an ordained Presbyterian (PCUSA) pastor in the Pacific Northwest. The least interesting thing about me is that I am a never-married woman.*

This article is meant for publication somewhere. More information available by emailing me at blessedarethingleladies@gmail.com.