

1 Corinthians 7:1-15, 25-39  
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### Living our Lives in Christ

For our visitors, we're doing something a little different during this season after the Pentecost. While our Psalm and Gospel readings are from the standard lectionary, our first scripture reading is from 1st Corinthians. We're on a parish-wide journey through each chapter of this book, a lectio continua, and this week we're covering Chapter 7.

Our standard lectionary only includes the last couple of verses of this chapter. Perhaps that's because touchy topics like sex, marriage, and divorce can be difficult to address in a short Sunday sermon and are better covered within small group discussions and bible studies. But that's exactly what we're going to do here today — lean into this chapter of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth.

As a quick reminder, Paul is writing to the Gentile church within Corinth, a major, metropolitan area and thriving economic center in the midst the Roman imperial empire. Corinth is a mix of many peoples, backgrounds, and traditions and as these new Christians began to live their faith, they had more than their share of missteps. Paul's letters provided guidance on how to get their lives back on track, while encouraging their deep desire to live and serve Christ crucified.

In the first 6 chapters, Paul addresses general concerns within this community: the unity of the church, Paul's own authority, and calling the people back to holiness and a common discipline. But here in the 7th chapter there's a change, so before I dive into the text, I want to pause and discuss context, so you can hold onto this background gently, as I talk about Paul's words.

First, this portion of Paul's letter is in response to specific questions that have been raised within the community. It's not general instructions for all circumstances. We see that from the very first verse, as Paul quotes what the church community has said, before beginning his response. I emphasize this point because, unfortunately, it's been common within the history of the church for some to generalize the application of this chapter, particularly regarding divorce, with some deeply disturbing results. Paul's words have been used to suppress women, to keep us "in our place," even to the point of encouraging those within abusive and destructive marriages to remain married, if they are to be good Christ-followers. Here, Paul is not writing a treatise on marriage itself, but responding to specific issues affecting this faith community.

And second, it's also important to understand that Paul's writing is shaped by his belief that Christ's return is imminent. Paul's viewpoint and advice is strongly affected by this conviction that Christ will return soon, placing a very different perspective on maintaining the status quo and continuing to live within situations as they currently are.

Additionally, Paul lived in a patriarchal time, when women were viewed as property, with no rights of their own, and subject, under patriarchal traditions, to the authority of their fathers, or brothers, or husbands. Gentile women could have a bit more personal autonomy than Jewish women, but all women were subject to real limitations within their patriarchal society.

All these factors shape Paul's worldview, so as Paul gives counsel to the Corinthians about intimacy or marriage, or celibacy, his words actually express extraordinarily radical thinking. In marriage, he insists on mutuality. The wife has a right to her husband's body every bit as much as the husband to the wife — an unheard of point-of-view, encouraging respect and equity between husband and wife. And to those married to an unbeliever, that's okay too, for the marriage sanctifies, makes holy, both the spouse and the children. Paul's words would provide phenomenal comfort, especially to women whose husbands may not support their faithfulness.

Paul also extends his radical perspective to women who are single, whose cultural norm would require both marriage and childbirth, by saying that celibacy is okay. Paul is opening a door, providing women a remarkable opportunity to find a new way to live in the world: a entirely different pathway towards fulfillment through lives focused on service to God.

Even Paul's counsel on divorce can be seen as supportive of women, for in this patriarchal time and place when women were viewed as chattel, Paul encouragement for the married to stay married recognizes that women, without the protection of a man, would have substantially reduced chances of survival, much less the opportunity to thrive. Women should be considered partners within the marriage, not disposable property.

Yet Paul also opens the door to exceptions, to divorce. He recognizes that there could be severe difficulties in marriages between people who NOW have different faiths and beliefs and these new circumstances bring a different reality to the community. A non-Christian spouse may not recognize the authority of the Lord. They may not consent to remain with the Christian spouse. Paul acknowledges that there may be nothing a Christ-follower can do to save the marriage and he says that they are no longer bound. Circumstances matter. Not all relationships can, nor should, be preserved. Paul's guidance shows that there is a place for discernment and recognition of individual circumstances — another radical position.

I'm personally very aware, both as a priest and as a woman, that some may view Paul as a misogynist, someone who dislikes and distrusts women, pushing to keep us in our place. There certainly have historically been some within the church who have interpreted and taught Paul's writings from narrow or literal viewpoints, without context, to help justify inequity, oppression, and injustice towards women. But that's not what this text tells us. Here, in this chapter, what we actually hear is Paul's acknowledgement that human relationships are complex and there is a place for discerning God's will in life's most difficult situations. I hear in these words that women, like men, are fully human, made in God's own image, and worthy to be treated with justice.

So here are the messages I'd like you hold onto from today:

First, that God loves us and blesses us for who we are. Our status — whether married or single, widowed or divorced, or whether we live ascetic or communal lives — does not matter. In all our ways of living, we are fully loved and invited to know God and to serve the Almighty by following Jesus. As the community of believers, we are all called to be God's disciples in the world.

And second, although Paul, like all of us, has his own personal preferences, he also invites and encourages God's people to open themselves to discerning God's will in their lives. For the truth is that although we live in the world, we are not of the world. Instead, we, as Christians, should see the world differently, recognizing the importance of discerning how we choose to live our lives in relation to our faith in the Risen Christ. This means opening ourselves to God's Spirit, who will guide us beyond those earthly assumptions that society tells us: from the cultural false images and roles about what makes the perfect relationship, the perfect husband, the perfect

wife. And it's corollary: if the relationship isn't perfect, you need to move on. To also recognizing that when there are marriages that cannot be fixed, that are toxic and destructive, there is still hope for the future — for should a marriage end, God is still with us, loving us, and we are still welcome within the community of the faithful.

And finally, as Paul tells us, the present form of this world is passing away, for this world has been changed through the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. Although no one knows the timing, we do know that God's kingdom has begun and we can look to the future with hope, for our salvation depends not on our success in this world, nor having all the answers, but on God's grace and mercy. Yes, we will face difficult and puzzling times in our lives, for life is complicated, but we can trust in the guidance of the Spirit in all things.

For God loves us. God loves us more than we can ask or imagine, and deeply desires for each of us to know God's peace.