

Sometimes it is a bit tricky to figure out what to preach on. We preachers of the Lutheran stripe are often given four different readings from the Bible. Sometimes they are clearly linked, and sometimes what ties them together seems like a thin thread. There are, therefore, many options for preaching. As I have aged, I have found myself, when needing to choose among those options, being drawn in by the hard-to-understand texts, the ones that make me and most of you go “hmmm,” or the ones that bring a smile to my face or make me laugh because of their oddity.

This was the case as I was preparing for this particular sermon. When I hear Paul say, “from now on, let those who have wives be as those who have none,” I am prone to laugh a bit, and you may be prone to say, Hmmm?” Really? Paul wants married guys to act as if they aren’t married. Let’s be honest. Some have done that. And do you want to give them more permission to pretend that they aren’t married? This doesn’t sound like the kind of thing that church people would be promoting. Church people ought to be interested in nurturing and protecting marriage. I mean, why do we sponsor annual marriage retreats if not because we believe that a community of faith and the culture as a whole have something at stake in vital and vibrant marriages?

Well, truthfully, if that is what you think Paul is up to, you are not getting the point. Paul in First Corinthians is always responding to questions that he has been asked by the community in Corinth. So, often we are hearing only one part of the conversation in Paul’s writings—his response. Evidently, there were members of the Corinthian congregation who thought not being married, being virginal, was a superior way of being. Members of the Corinthian

congregation are asking Paul to weigh in on the conversation. What do you think of this no marrying thing, Paul?

Initially, Paul says he has no word from the Lord on this matter; he just has an opinion. And the opinion is that marrying or not marrying are both okay. His only recommendation is that in light of what he calls the “impending crisis,” people should stay what they are. If they are married, they should stay married. If they are single, they should stay single. Concerning the single folks, he says that life will probably be easier for them, if they don’t get a spouse. He writes: “Those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that.” I laugh a little at that. There may be some truth in his claim.

Paul takes the position he does—the single should remain single and the married should remain married—because he thinks that Jesus is coming back at any minute. Why get involved in all kinds of new things if they all are going to be interrupted by Jesus’ return. That is why he says, “The appointed time has grown short.”

Paul wants people to live in light of what he thinks is most important. And what is most important is the impending arrival of the returned Jesus. Live your lives in light of what is coming, Paul is saying. If you have wives, live as if something is more important than them. If you are mourning, live as if there is something more important than your mourning. If you are joyous, recognize that there is something greater than your joy. If you are buying stuff, realize that stuff isn’t as important as what is about to occur.

Now, it’s been 2000 years since Paul wrote his correspondence to the Corinthians, and Jesus still hasn’t returned. Does that mean his advice is not at all helpful? Should we just throw out his words, thinking that they are vestiges of a past, strange worldview? I don’t think so. Now personally, I believe that it is worth your while to

engage in relationship. Life is fundamentally about relationship. Don't miss the opportunity to relate. Life isn't an experience of some spiritual never-never land that keeps you away from bodies and commitments. Life is an engaged, physical reality. Sensuality, sexuality, friendships, mourning, items that you buy and that you enjoy, are an integral part of your humanness. Don't despise them. Enjoy them.

But hear this. They are not everything. Your kids are not everything. They probably will survive if you don't attend every one of their games or give them every experience or everything they have ever wanted. Your spouse is not everything. He or she can go off and do things without you, and you will be fine. And by the way, those of you who have lost spouses through death or divorce have been forced to face this. You can do it without them. They are not everything.

Your family is not everything. Your job is not everything. It and you will survive if you take some time off to go to your kid's game. Your home is not everything. You'll do alright if it is not impeccably clean or is not the most ideal house you ever dreamed of. Your church is not everything. Your stock portfolio is not everything. Your big screen television, your motorcycle, your bike—they are not everything. Your reputation is not everything. Your current situation is not everything. Your present feeling of happiness or your current experience of the blues—they are not everything.

Paul lays it on the line: "The present form of this world is passing away." What you think is so important now will soon not matter; it will disappear into life's graveyard. And so, why do you get worked up over so much? Why do you give so much energy to that which isn't ultimate? Why do you have a sense of urgency about

everything, except that which is truly urgent? What truly is urgent is on its way, so don't live as if everything else is so urgent.

In many ways, that is what Jesus is saying in the Gospel of Mark today. In his first words in Mark, he proclaims: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." Something new is on its way, and in Mark, it is here. And that something new Jesus calls "the kingdom of God," what Richard Rohr labels as the "the big picture," what I say is "God's way of doing things." The kingdom is not where we go when we die; it is not heaven. It is life as if God were in charge. That kind of life has arrived, Jesus says in Mark. It is drawing near in him. A world of compassion, grace, peace, justice, forgiveness is breathing down our necks, knocking at our door, fascinating us, gripping us, calling us.

The present form of this world is passing away. What has arrived is God's world, and that world calls us in the midst of our family relationships, in the midst of job commitments, in the midst of a world where bombs are being dropped on children and ruining land, buildings and lives, in the midst of a nation where people can't get along with each and talk civilly with each other. In the midst of real life, what really matters has come; God's way of doing things is showing up on the scene, beckoning us, and I would even say, haunting us.

Yes, please note. It is good news (the gospel) that has shown up on the scene. What's coming at us is not threats of hell or judgment that will pay us for what we've done. What's arrived on the scene, and what is haunting us is grace, forgiveness, justice, and peace. And let's be honest. Many of us don't live there. War is a sign that we don't live there. Environmental degradation is a sign that we live elsewhere. A world in which millions of people are leaving their

homes to find a safer, more secure place is a sign that we don't live there. A heart filled with anger and resentment is a sign that we don't reside in grace. The need to justify ourselves at the expense of other people is a sign that we are far from the world where love is in charge.

No wonder then that the first word from Jesus in Mark is change, repent. Love, grace, justice, and forgiveness have arrived. Give in. Let go. Turn your hearts in the direction of love that is seeking you. Let the grace that is after you permeate all that you are and all that you do. Repent and trust in the good news.

And then live out your trust in the context of a community of grace and forgiveness. The first action of Jesus in Mark is to create a community. Community is not incidental to the good news. Jesus and his work need James and John, Peter and Andrew. The good news of love and compassion brings people together.

Don't do this faith thing alone. You really can't. It is meant to be done together. The church matters, and not for the sake of keeping an institution alive, but for the sake of our personal growth and the work that we have to do in the world—the work of grace and love.

Paul got all of this going because of his odd remark that men with wives should live as if they have none. This is not an invitation into infidelity. It is an invitation to live lives focused on what really matters. It is an invitation to be grasped by the kingdom of grace and love and to see everything, family and job included, in light of that big picture.