

In 1987, Michael Jackson's landmark album *Bad* became the first ever to have five singles reach #1 on the Billboard charts. For over 20 years, it was the only album to do so, until last year, when Katy Perry's song "Last Friday Night" hit #1, tying her album *Teenage Dream* with *Bad* and causing quite an uproar in the music community.

Whatever you think of Katy Perry's music, it's fascinating that her songs have achieved such popularity. They're an opportunity to put a finger on the pulse of our culture - the music that we're connecting with (as evidenced by their #1 status - five of these songs have been the most popular in the country).

None of the songs so encapsulates the fairy-tale romance ideas we have about love, relationships and marriage as well as the title track (and #1 single) "Teenage Dream". In the song, Perry raves about her lover, who is perfect for her in every way. Katy claims her long-time search for her one, true love has finally ended when she sings,

"I finally found you, my missing puzzle piece!"

That's an idea that's been a part of Western culture since Plato. He was the first to theorize that humans were essentially souls that had been split in half at birth, and that we spend the rest of our lives looking for our other half. They are literally our soul-mates. Is there a more romantic notion than the idea that we all have this hole inside us, this gap in our persons and that somewhere out there is a person perfectly designed for us? That person who fits just right, who "gets us"?

We love that idea – it's the foundation of the Romantic, fairy tale script. It's as old as Plato and as fresh as romantic comedies. Like Jerry McGuire, we just want to find that person who complete us. Our missing puzzle piece.

It's ironic that a synonym for Katy's song is "Adolescent Fantasy" because though we don't acknowledge it, that's exactly what the idea of a perfect soul-mate is. It's a delusion that can poison the real relationships we have, and it's a fantasy that puts dangerous, unfair pressure on love and marriage.

We have this sense that we're broken, that we're incomplete. And that is true - as individual people, we're not complete. As humans, we're sinful, fallen and in need of redemption. We have an innate sense of this, so we seek out wholeness, completeness.

Our problem is that we imagine ourselves to be half-souls. That we need a romantic Other to be complete. We draw our pictures of personhood from fairy tales like *Jerry McGuire* or *Teenage Dream* (and I don't mean to pick on those two... I dare you to find a romantic comedy or love song that doesn't embody this idea). We believe that a romantic relationship is what we're missing. That a love or marriage relationship will make us whole.

We end up talking about people who are single as if they're broken (single people, you know what I'm talking about). We rarely say it out loud, but in our culture, if you're single, that means you're alone and if you're alone, then you must be by definition incomplete.

You'd think that in the Church we'd be better than that, but we're not. Despite the fact that Plato didn't contribute anything to the Bible, this theology has entwined itself into the Church. We love to talk about finding "The One" – that person that God hand-crafted just for us. I heard of an adult Sunday School class at a Church once called "Pairs and Spares". As a teen, I watched my own mom, in the wake of my parents' divorce, participate in a singles group in our church that was little more than a matchmaking service designed to "fix" single adults. I didn't get married until I was 28, and I've been working in the Church since I was 22. I had plenty of well-intentioned people ask me when I was going to finally get married (a couple of perhaps-less-well-intentioned people explicitly told me I needed to find a wife to fix me).

If you're a single person, you've heard this stuff. Whether you've never married or you're divorced or widowed, you've been told, probably both explicitly and implicitly that there's something wrong with you and you need someone in your life to fix you. That you're broken and you need someone to make you whole.

But the reality is that only God can make us whole. When we look to anyone else (even a spouse) or anything else (like the institution of marriage or the more abstract idea of 'true love'), we're committing idolatry. We're looking for fulfillment, purpose and meaning from something that can't actually give us those things. We're replacing God with things that are less than God.

In the Church, we *should* know better. Because we worship this guy named Jesus who was fully human, who lived a perfect, fully human, fully engaged life. He wasn't broken. He wasn't missing any puzzle pieces. And all apologies to Dan Brown, it's not because he was married.

Jesus was single, but he was fully complete. Jesus, the most perfect, whole person who ever lived, didn't need someone else to complete him.

Or consider the number 2 guy in early Christian history, the apostle Paul. He wrote more than a quarter of the New Testament and planted churches all over the Roman Empire. And he was single. Listen to what he says in the 7th chapter of his first letter to the churches in Corinth:

"I wish everyone were single, just as I am. But God gives to some the gift of marriage, and to others the gift of singleness. So I say to those who aren't married and to widows-- it's better to stay unmarried, just as I am. But if they can't control themselves, they should go ahead and marry. It's better to marry than to burn with lust." -- 1 Corinthians 7:7-9 (NLT)

It's *better* to be single. *Not* being married is better than being married. If you can help it, you should stay single.

There's a lot to say about that, but first, let's acknowledge that this clearly means we don't need a spouse to be whole. And more than that, marriage won't make you whole. True Love can't complete you. It can't fill the need for wholeness we crave.

So why don't we talk about these verses more? Why do we skip right over 1 Corinthians 7 in our hurry to get to chapter 13 when we get married? We've gotten it very backwards.

And that leads to a lot of disappointment. It's why most divorces are within the first 10 years of marriage, often around the so-called seven-year-itch. It's a disturbing pattern I've seen again and

again - when the marriage gets hard, after the romance wears off and you realize this person isn't your missing puzzle piece, that you don't fit together as well as you thought you did (lots more on this next week), one person decides they've made a mistake.

They'd say they agree with Paul: they'd be better off single!

Better off - as in happier, more fulfilled. It's the opposite of the idolatry of marriage. It's the idolatry of singleness. It's the belief that what I need to be a whole person is to be single, to be myself, to be free of responsibility.

Over the last 20 years, there's been a gradual rise in the status of the single in our culture. Today women would rather be seen at a Girls Night Out than be known as a Soccer Mom. Guys would rather be in their Man Caves than coaching their kids' little league games. Why? Because Girls Nights Out are cool and soccer moms are lame. Because Man Caves are *awesome*.

What's fascinating about these twin phenomena is that they represent regression. They're opportunities to recapture the single lifestyle. Both spaces are particularly gendered. The spouse is not allowed.

Of course there's nothing inherently wrong with going out with your friends or having a space that's "yours". But we should be careful when we participate in these spaces. Are they escapes? Are we trying to get away from the drudgery of our lives, trying to recapture the "good ole days" when we didn't have all that responsibility? Are we trying to find wholeness in those spaces?

That is dangerous. Because it assumes that wholeness is somewhere out there, away from my marriage, away from the commitments I've made.

And it's just plain wrong. It's ironic that high school and college culture has become so trendy. Many adults seem literally to want Katy Perry's "Teenage Dream". We want to get back to the lifestyle that teens live - unencumbered, no responsibility. Acting like a teenager is fine when you're a teenager. But that's not what it means to be an adult. A lot of us need to grow up and quit thinking that there's something magical in the world of singleness that will make us feel whole and fulfilled.

That's not what Paul was talking about, and that's not consistent with the model of personhood we see in the Scriptures. If we go clear back to the beginning, the Genesis 2 creation story undercuts the idolatry of Singleness. God first creates a single human being. Then when it's just the first person, God and all the animals in the world, God says this:

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make an ally who is just right for him."

...So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. While the man slept, the LORD God took out one of the man's ribs and closed up the opening. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib, and he brought her to the man.

"At last!" the man exclaimed. "This one is bone from my bone, and flesh from my flesh! She will be called 'woman,' because she was taken from 'man.'" -- Genesis 2:18-23 (NLT)

When the Scriptures describe what it means to be human, they tell us that we were not designed to be alone. We weren't created to thrive apart from community.

Many of you might recognize this text as a marriage text. This is the first married couple - Adam and Eve, and this passage is often used at weddings. So doesn't this support the idea that everyone should get married?

Well, if this were the only text in the Scriptures that talk about healthy human relationships, then yes. We'd have to conclude that a healthy person is a married person. And, in fact, throughout Israel's history leading up to Jesus' time, that's exactly what people thought. Like we talked about last week, marriage and child-bearing were essential to a family and community's survival.

But as we've already seen, both Jesus and Paul were single. We have Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7. Both Jesus and Paul (and many, many Christians throughout history) were fully engaged, fulfilled persons.

[Singles video]

The reality is that marriage and singlehood are two ways to be human. Neither of them is God's only path to wholeness. In fact, neither can actually fulfill you. So, single people: if you think being in love, getting married will fix everything, you're wrong. Marriage is just a different way to be human. It has all its own problems, worries and struggles.

Single persons can develop more intimate friendships than most married persons, because single persons have more time to invest in those relationships. Single persons have a lot more freedom and simplicity in their lives – they don't have to worry about another person's schedule and person like a married person must.

And married people: if you think that what you really need is just to get a taste of the single life again, you'll be happy, if what you think stands between you and your wholeness is the family you've created, then you're wrong. There's nothing magic about being single, and you're romanticizing how much fun you actually had when you were single. Cut back on watching American Pie movies.

It's also true that single persons will experience loneliness and alienation more readily. Single persons also have to guard more carefully against sexual frustration and selfishness.

There's no magic, perfect relationship status. Married people can be miserable in their marriedness. Single persons can be miserable in their singleness. No matter which side of the fence you're on, everyone thinks the grass is greener on the other side. So what's the problem?

Indulge me in a stupid joke. This is all like a man who goes to a doctor complaining that his whole body hurts. The doctor asks him what the problem is and the man says, "Everywhere hurts. This hurts (touch cheek), and this hurts (touch arm) and this hurts (touch leg) and this hurts (touch chest)."

"Interesting," the doctor responds. "It's clear what's wrong with you."

"What?!" the man exclaimed.

The doctor replied, "Your finger is broken."

Relationships are connections between two people. If you're a broken person, then every relationship you're in will be broken.

Not because of the other person. Because of you.

If you're not whole, if you're not fulfilled, if you're not grounded in Jesus first, before you're in a relationship, guess what? You're always going to have problems. You won't feel fulfilled in any relationship.

And you can blame everyone else all you want - the boy- or girlfriend. The spouse. Your kids. Your boss. Your friends.

But the reality is, you need to fix *you*.

And romance can't fix you. Falling in love and getting married won't magically heal you. And if you're *in* a broken relationship, the answer isn't running to the single life, pursuing the bachelor or bachelorette lifestyle. Neither of those states can fix you.

So what's the answer? How do we find wholeness?

According to the Scriptures, it's in the community of the Church we find our wholeness. Not in spouses and significant others, but in joining with those who are following Jesus. Community, not romance, is the biblical path to wholeness.

Of course we know that community doesn't automatically make us healthy - we've seen enough reality TV to know that in the Real World you don't just put people in a house together and they magically become healthy, whole people.

But the Church, the community of God, is the place where we become healthy. Paul describes the Church like one big body that we're all parts of. So if you're the finger on our body here, and you're broken, we're all going to feel that pain with you. But the way you become healthy isn't by cutting yourself off from the body, and the way we quit feeling pain isn't by casting you out - we'd be crippled and you'd have no chance of healing.

No, just like with our physical bodies heal by staying whole, we heal by remaining a part of the Church. The Church, the community of God is the ground in which we become healthy, whole persons. Married couples need the Church to be healthy and whole. Single persons need the Church to be healthy and whole. We all need the community of God's Church.

Our culture sends mixed messages about what it takes to be a whole person. On one hand, we're taught we're all puzzles looking for that missing piece that completes me. We're taught to idolize romance, as though a marriage-type relationship can fix us, make us whole.

On the other hand, we also idolize single, young adulthood. More and more adults who know they're broken think the answer to their pain is to regress to their late teens/early 20s. We're told that growing up is lame, that families are a drag and that anything that hinders our freedom is the cost of adulthood that fewer of us every day are willing to pay.

Both idols lie to us. Both are deadly.

Singleness can't fix you. Neither can marriage. Because being single and being married are simply two different ways to be human. And humans need the Church, the community of God. We need to be grounded in Jesus to be whole.

If you're hurting, if you're broken, the answer isn't to pine for the greener grass on the other side of the fence. It's to water your own grass.

If you're single, pour yourself into becoming a healthy, whole person. Pursue friendships that make you better. Figure out how God has gifted you and called you. Serve other people.

And if you're married, pour yourself into becoming a healthy, whole person. Pursue friendship with your spouse, your kids and your church community. Learn how to serve with your spouse, how to complement each other. (and complimenting each other wouldn't hurt either)

Quit looking elsewhere for your wholeness. God is here in this place, in this life you're living right now. So what does your path to wholeness look like?

Communion:

We close today with the Communion meal. It's the meal we share in common (hence 'Communion'). We eat this meal together, as a whole body full of broken people who are becoming whole.

Not because we're finding our missing puzzle pieces, those other halves of souls. No, we are becoming whole in Christ, together. Whether we're married or single. We're all one body.

When Jesus broke bread, he gave it to us as his body, broken for our sin. Jesus met us in our brokenness. When he gave us wine (we use juice), it was as his blood, poured out to restore us to God, to make us whole persons together with one another and with God.

You don't eat communion alone. We all eat it together. So today, as you come to Jesus' table, as you share in his meal, consider this:

Where are you seeking your wholeness? Is it in a romantic relationship? You won't find it there. Is it in some myth of singlehood? It's not there either. Those are false idols with false promises.

Come to God's table. Share in Jesus' meal and find your wholeness among your brothers and sisters.

Let's pray together.