

INTRO

Good morning and welcome! My name is Sue Sweeney and I'm part of the preaching team here. I live here in Rowlett and I attend Catalyst with my husband, Jeff and our two daughters, Stella who is 7 and Clara who is 4.

Our culture loves to discuss the question, "what would you do if you knew the world was ending tomorrow?" There are tons of movies about this topic. Most of them are pretty silly. It's actually a pretty serious question...almost a scary question...if you think about it because it reveals a lot about what we really wish we had in life.

So, how do you picture yourself spending your very last day on Earth? Perched on top of a mountain of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups surrounded with your loved ones? Maybe that's just me. Peanut Butter Cups or not, I know I would want to spend my last day with my husband and our girls.

A couple weeks ago, I did some informal research on social media. I asked my Facebook friends, "If the world was going to end tomorrow, what would you do?" in less than a day, I got 17 responses. There were some different ideas. Among them were eating donuts, listening to music, and vanquishing enemies. All those I could get behind! Well, maybe at least the donuts and music. I'm sure the response about enemy vanquishing was facetious...at least I hope. One thing was constant- almost all the responses included spending time with loved ones during their last day on earth.

This reveals how important relationships are in our lives.

Thinking about this question- how would we spend our last day on earth- forces us to take stock in our lives right now. It leads us to think about what we really want out of the relationships we have with our friends, family, and significant others- or lack thereof. "Who do I have in my life? Who do I want to be part of my life, but they're not? Or, who is this person I'm sharing my life with? We used to be in love? What's happened?" Relationships are so important, yet they have the tendency to be so imperfect.

It's possible that for many of us, trying to answer this question about our last day on earth could reveal that we're not exactly where we want to be in life right now. When we hear other people answer this question, we hear about them spending time with loved ones- holding their spouse and children close. Then we think about ourselves. What if we don't have spouses and children? When we think about how we would spend our last days, it tends to make us think about what we're going to be missing. It raises questions about the status of our relationships. Maybe you're not married yet and you thought we would be by now. Maybe you were married and it didn't work out. Maybe you are currently married, but things aren't going exactly how you imagined. We long for things to be different than the way they are now. These longings reveal our happiness gap- the gap between where we are right now and the life we think we're supposed to be having right now.

For a long time it seemed like marriage was the way to find happiness. Now, it seems TV shows like *How I Met Your Mother* and *Insecure* glorify the single life. We're getting mixed messages from different

places. Anymore, if you talk to single people, they want to be married. If you talk to married people, they want to be single. It seems like the grass is always greener on the other side. Churches have long come down on the side of marriage (even though Jesus was single!) to the extent that, in many churches like ours, single people have struggled finding where they fit. It leads us to wonder which God really thinks is better? Is it better to be married or is it better to be single?

When I asked that question on Facebook, “if the world was going to end tomorrow, what would you do?” Elizabeth Sims replied, “I can’t imagine doing anything different.” Not that there is necessarily a right or wrong answer to this question, but what Elizabeth said really resonates with what the Apostle Paul had to say to his church in Corinth. There is something more important than what we think is the “right” way to do things. The Good News is that God cares more about who we are now, where we are now. Things don’t need to be different for us to live into the image of God. You know what they say, “The grass isn’t necessarily greener on the other side, the grass is greener where you water it.”

As we sing and worship together this morning with these songs, think about where you are in your life right now, whether you’re married or single or whatever your relationship status and reflect on how you are already poised to be the person God intended you to be, right where you are in life right now. What if you were living the sort of life where, when you found out the world was ending, you would just live one more day doing what you're already doing?

MESSAGE

In the Church calendar, this is the season of Epiphany. As the season following Christmas, Epiphany celebrates God being revealed not just a few people, but to everyone. This year, our Epiphany series is called "Ask Better Questions" - so what does asking questions have to do with God being revealed to everyone?

This whole series, we’re looking specifically at what the Apostle Paul wrote to the church he planted in Corinth. Corinth, in the first century, was a cosmopolitan town. You could say Las Vegas stole its tag line from Corinth, You know, “what happens in Corinth stays in Corinth.” The early Christian church here reflected the cultural and ... moral diversity of this city. What started happening in the Corinthian church is what always happens when people from completely different walks of life find themselves trying to live life together- tough questions get raised and there is disagreement...A LOT of disagreement. So, 1 Corinthians, chapter 7 we see again these early Christians called upon Paul - the guy who founded their church - for answers to their tough questions. This time, they wanted to know which God thought was better- to be married or to be single?

Context matters a lot here. Throughout chapter 7, Paul tries to address questions the Corinthians were having about whether or not their young “virgin” daughters should get married or stay single. In this sense, these particular issues were unique to their time period where it was customary to commit your daughters to arranged marriages at a young age for economic reasons. We also know there was likely a famine in the land during this time which would have impacted the Corinthians. Food was scarce and it didn’t look like things were going to get any better any time soon. This lead parents to have the kinds of

discussions parents have in times like these throughout history...does it make sense for folks to be making babies right now if that means more hungry mouths to feed?

We've seen things like this before. Do you remember back in 2012 when thought the world was going to end? The Mayan calendar, allegedly, ended on December 21st, 2012 and this was supposed to mark the beginning of an apocalypse. The months leading up had the internet convinced we were all in a doomsday countdown to the end of the world.

To compound the issue, Paul had taught them that he believed Jesus was coming back soon and the world as they knew it was going to end anyway. So, the way Paul writes in his letter, we get the sense there was a lot of hand-wringing among parents in the Corinthian church about whether or not they should even bother to get their daughters married off or really do anything at all!

That makes Paul's advice here difficult to relate to for a couple reasons. First of all, I'm not planning to arrange marriages for my own daughters, Stella and Clara. I hope none of you are planning to arrange marriages for your children either. Also, obviously, It's 2,000 years later and Jesus did not return yet. We're all pretty sure the world had not ended. So, Paul was wrong here and he admits as much in this letter.

However, what is important to take from this is how Paul perceived again that there was a better question underneath the questions the Corinthians were asking about the relationship statuses of their daughters. Paul explained that the issue isn't really about marriage or singleness. Their question really is, "What should we do while we're waiting?"

Does it matter whether the world is ending tomorrow or not? As we're looking forward to Jesus' return, what do we do NOW? If God is with Us (the Christmas promise) then how do we live with God as we wait for God to return?

[Scripture Slide] These are questions we can relate to. Everyone's waiting for *something*. Maybe it's a big something - like a relationship-status change or a different job or the end of the world. Maybe it's just your next vacation day or killer podcast to make your commute more tolerable. We're all waiting. What do we do while we wait? Let's look at 1 Corinthians chapter 7 verses 25-31 in our Bibles. If you don't have a Bible of your own or the App on your phone, you're welcome to one of the Bibles on the table in the back of the room and it is yours to keep if you would like. It's on page ###.

This reading is going to sound a little different because it's from The Message (MSG), which is a translation that goes for a more modern paraphrasing of the original texts. The purpose is so that Paul's words will resonate with us, in our language, the same way it did with the first believers in Corinth. So let's read and think about the question the Corinthians were really trying to ask here...

The Master did not give explicit direction regarding virgins, but as one much experienced in the mercy of the Master and loyal to him all the way, you can trust my counsel. Because of the current pressures on us

from all sides, I think it would probably be best to stay just as you are. Are you married? Stay married. Are you unmarried? Don't get married. But there's certainly no sin in getting married, whether you're a virgin or not. All I am saying is that when you marry, you take on additional stress in an already stressful time, and I want to spare you if possible.

I do want to point out, friends, that time is of the essence. There is no time to waste, so don't complicate your lives unnecessarily. Keep it simple—in marriage, grief, joy, whatever. Even in ordinary things—your daily routines of shopping, and so on. Deal as sparingly as possible with the things the world thrusts on you. This world as you see it is on its way out.

So Paul's advice is basically this, "Look people! don't sweat it! If you're married fine, if you're single, just stay single! Paul earlier in the chapter admits that maybe it's just easier to be single like him because marriage seems to just complicate your life unnecessarily.

So, in today's context, does what Paul say about marriage and singleness really matter? Concerning the issues with marrying off daughters Paul even writes, "This is not from the Lord, this is just some advice from me." He was hoping people would just listen to his thoughts on the matter and then discern what was best for their own lives. We believe the Corinthians understood this.

So their culture was different than ours, but we still have questions today about marriage and singleness, questions that are really about fulfillment and contentment. There is a lot of social and political pressure coming from lots of different places. Many religious institutions tend to prescribe a certain order: courtship, marriage, then babies. We see people in movies, tv, and in our own lives doing things in a different order. My mom used to call that, "putting the cart before the horse." So, what does God say about that? Many people see marriage as an avenue for economic security, social status, and personal and social affirmation instead of a way to learn more about God's unconditional love. What does God have to say about that? Next is the issue of children. Of course you should have children! But, what if you want children and can't have them, or can have them and are not sure you want them? Then throw singleness into the mix! Being single is considered some sort of layover between childhood and married life and some people just seem stuck there. We ask, "what does God say we should do?" when the question we really want answered here is, "what will make me finally feel complete?"

We think God has a secret plan that he has hidden from us and we're spending all this time trying to figure out. If I'm still single, then what am I doing wrong? If I'm married and things are difficult, well then, did God have someone else picked out for me to marry and I chose the wrong person? We forget that life is just hard. We forget that it's hard to be single and it's hard to be married. There's *so much* of our lives that's outside of our control (like the Corinthians couldn't control the famine). But we spend so much of our time worrying about those things we have no control over.

So here's a little bit of good news: God does not have a preferred relationship status. Stop looking for fulfillment and contentment in marriage and singleness. The grass is not any greener over there. The relationships you have right now, there's the grass you should be watering.

You're already in the place you need to be to receive the life you were intended to have. God can use you to help usher in love, peace, and hope whether you're single or married. God cares about who you are right now, in this place in your life where you are right now. Don't get entangled in all these expectations the world puts on you because they won't lead to anything good anyway.

It's God's will that we be formed into the likeness of Jesus not matter what our situation.

I've been really into using the Waze App on my iPhone. I like it better than Google Maps. I just type in my desired destination and it gives me turn-by-turn directions. It even magically suggests an alternate route I can take to save time if there is an accident up ahead and a traffic jam. It's amazing. Sometimes we think of God's will as if it's our own person Waze app. I like to call it, "God Waze." All we have to do is pray in the desired destination and God will give us the turn by turn directions we need to get there. For example, where we can stop along the way to find and pick up a husband or a wife. When and where swing by and pick up children and a career. "God Waze" also provides an alternate route in case we run into trouble.

I'm just not sure God works that way and the Good News is, it's probably better that God doesn't.

The church is part of creating this problem. From the pulpit, pastors tell people that God's will for their life IS a specific route, and then when things don't work out the way we thought they would, we spend a lot of time worrying that we messed things up somewhere along the way?

There have been times in my life where I felt like this, but God never gave me turn-by-turn directions for how to live my life. Jeff and I have been married for almost 13 years. When I look back to the beginning of our relationship, I don't see any miraculous events or revelations where God intervened and changed the trajectory of my life. Maybe that happened, and I just didn't realize it, but our story is an ordinary one:

Jeff and I met at college, in the dining hall, when we were both freshmen at the same university. We had some friends in common and we started hanging out. We liked the same kind of music, so that lead to dates at concerts where we wanted to see the same bands. As teenagers do, we quickly fell in love. After we were together a couple months, Jeff shared with me that he had a genetic degenerative eye disease called Retinitis Pigmentosa and it was likely he would eventually be completely blind, maybe by the time he was 50 years old. He also said that since the disease was genetic, it was possible he could pass it on to his children, should he have any, and that was something he was not sure he wanted to do.

We were 18 and 19 years old at the time. To me, 50 years old felt elderly and I wasn't anywhere close to thinking about having kids of my own. All I knew, was that I was in love with Jeff and we were happy

together. 16 years later, here we are- two daughters, with healthy eyes and a handicapped parking placard for our minivan for Jeff. Which, is actually pretty awesome because we can get good parking spots at concerts when we go, because that is something we still like to do together.

If you would have asked me, when I was a teenager, what my life would look like when I was in my mid-30's, I would have thought, first of all, that being in my 30's was elderly. I never would have guessed I would have found the love of my life before I was 20 years old. I never dated anyone seriously in high school so I imagined college would be the same way. I wasn't excited about going to college because I wanted to find someone to marry. I was excited about college because I was a huge nerd and I loved school.

There was not moment along the way, where God showed me what the grand plan was. I never saw turn by turn directions for my life before I met Jeff or after. All I know, is that both Jeff and I grew up learning in church that we should be sensitive to the nudging of the Holy Spirit. We were taught that spouses should love each other in a way that helped them understand God's unconditional love a little better. Through being a part of this church, Catalyst, through our pastor, JR's teaching, through our C-group, Jeff and I have grown even closer together in our understanding that the purpose of our marriage...and all our relationships... is to learn what it means to be made in the image of God. So, that is our roadmap - a relationship that mirrors God's love for Creation in the love we have for each other.

God never gave me turn-by-turn directions for how to live my life. That's because God isn't trying to get us to hit a spot on the map. We're not going somewhere; we're becoming someone. We're growing into the image of our God through the relationships we have in our lives and the person of Jesus helps us understand what that is supposed to look like. We don't need to worry about taking the right route and feeling plagued by guilt with our relationships status. The destination...the goal is about each of us becoming a person. It's becoming a person who looks more like Jesus.

If you're single right now, what would it look like to for you to live out God's love in the love you have for those around you- the friends and family in your life right now? Your co-workers? Your neighbors? The people you go to church with? What would it look like to follow the example of Jesus in all your interactions with others? This is why the church has long considered singleness as a gift. There's a reason Paul said, "I wish everyone was single like me." If you're single, you have the time to invest in friendships in a way I just can't as a married mother of two.

If you're married right now, what would it look like for you to live out God's love in the love you have for those around you- the friends and family in your life right now? Your spouse? Your co-workers? Your neighbors? The people you go to church with? What would it look like to follow the example of Jesus in all your interactions with others?

The grass isn't greener anywhere else. It's time to stop thinking that something big needs to change in order for us to have the life we are supposed to have. We are living that life right now and the Holy Spirit is moving and working, showing us right now what it means to look more like Jesus. We just need

to be open and receptive to her gentle nudging- to look for the next right step in the relationships in our lives right now.

As Paul says, “Don’t needlessly complicate your life. Keep it simple.” Focus on the life God has given you. So instead of asking the wrong questions like, “does God want me to be single or married?” “Is the grass greener on the other side?” “If I find the right person then will my life be happy and complete?”

Catalyst, let’s ask the right question instead, “How can I look more like Jesus right where I am right now?”

COMMUNION

[Communion Slide] If you’re ready to ask this question for yourself, I invite you to approach the communion table today. This table invites us to share the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he was killed. At that meal, he broke bread and gave it to his followers, saying, “This is my body, broken for you. Eat it.” Later in the meal, he offered a cup of wine, saying, “This is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin. Drink it.”

Jesus shows us what it means to live into God’s will: he thrust off the expectations of the world and lived a life that was committed to bringing about the Kingdom of God on Earth. We follow his lead, walk in his footsteps and ask God to make us into God’s image.

You don’t have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion with us today. If you’re willing to ask questions that lead you to be more like Jesus instead of more like the World. If you are ready to be the person God intended you to be, right where you are in life right now. then you’re welcome to participate.

Before we approach the table, I’m going to lead you in a prayer of Examen. I’ll ask you four questions to give you space to reflect on what God is calling you to today. After we’ve worked through those questions, I’ll pray for all of us, and then you’re welcome to come forward as you’re ready.

Here’s the first question:

1. When in the last week have I been fulfilled where I am?
2. When in the last week have I been anxious or discontent?
3. When in the next week will I feel anxious or discontent?
4. How can I nourish my active relationships this week?

Prayer

Assignment/Blessing

Epiphany Question: How am I living into the life I have right now?