

I Have No Husband

A Reflection on the Life of Elisabeth van Leeuwarden

BRIANNA C. MILLETT¹

-Are you married?

-No.

-Are you dating?

-No.

-Do you want to date?

-Not really.

-Do you want to get married?

-Not at this present moment. Maybe someday. Maybe not.

In my simple life in the rather homogenous land of the upper Midwest, I have been engaged in more dialogues like this than I care to count. I am a thirty-four-year-old woman. A thirty-four-year-old unmarried woman. A thirty-four-year-old unmarried woman who is also not dating. This status is unquestionably non-normative.

If you're anything like the rest of the contemporary, hyper-relationship-focused, Western society in which I live, you are probably saying to yourself, "What's wrong with her?" Or, "I bet she has serious issues." You might be curious about my physical features—it's OK, that's generally the direction our culturally conditioned minds wander. You might even have thought, "Eeek. She must be a ghastly piece of work." Whatever your immediate curiosity suggests, let me assure you, there is nothing "wrong" with me. I do not have serious issues. (Issues? Sure. But who doesn't have their fair share of issues? We are, after all, works in progress.) And as for my physical appearance? Well, I happen to think I'm rather lovely. And my mother agrees.

¹ Brianna Millett is a volunteer preacher and teacher at Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, and adjunct professor at Bethel University. As a recent graduate from United Theological Seminary (Minnesota) with a Master's Degree in Public and Missional Theology, she spends her time reading and writing, speaking on "singleness," and racking up the miles on her running sneakers.

Introduction

When I heard about the theme for this issue of *Anabaptist Witness* on gender and mission, I knew I wanted to share a personal reflection. The aim of this reflection is twofold: First, I wish to highlight the significance of the unmarried person's ability to live a life wholly devoted to following Jesus. I believe the community of unmarried people needs encouragement, and the church at large needs to adjust the methods by which they "minister" to this community. I will also highlight a story that I find deeply encouraging—that of Elisabeth van Leeuwarden (or, Lijsbeth Dirks). Elisabeth was a single and courageous woman who did not let her marital status or gender stand in the way of her commitment to Christ or to her vocational calling as a leader and teacher in the early Anabaptist movement.²

Elisabeth's story demonstrates the radical gender equality found in Christ, and models the full personhood of unmarried individuals. One need not be male or married in order to participate fully in the mission of God. For generations, leadership opportunities have been withheld from women, who have then been encouraged to instead pursue a life of "marital bliss." But I believe Elisabeth's story has something different to say. I have something different to say. And scripture has something different to say.

Significance of the Unmarried

I may not blame my "singleness" on God. Singleness, like suffering, death, and all else that is less than perfect in this world, was not God's original plan for his creation. It was one of the many results of man's fall.³

I remember the first time I read this quote by Margaret Clarkson. It was the final year of my undergraduate studies, and I was researching ideas for my final thesis on the topic of singleness. For years I had been shaped and led to believe that a person is not complete until that person has been wed to another. I grew up with the messages perpetuated by Walt Disney; those of us from the West are intimately familiar with these stories—classic tales of forlorn beauties pining for their prince to come. As I entered into young adulthood, I heard the same messages, but Hollywood beauties began to take the place of the cartoon beauties of my childhood. Still, the ideal was the same: women should be physically beautiful and passively wait for their prince to swoop in and inaugurate

² While I certainly commend, indeed even admire, the faith journey of an individual whose life came to an untimely end due to persecution, I cannot commend, nor do I wish to imply, that martyrdom is the sign of true faith.

³ Margaret Clarkson, "Singleness: His Share for Me," *Christianity Today* 23, no. 10 (February 1979): 15.

their true, complete life.

As a young adult, I came to faith in Christ and quickly learned that the message the church⁴ provided was not unlike the messages I received from Hollywood: “It’s not good for a human to be alone.”⁵ Therefore, God created marriage.⁶ And so the “biblical” narrative goes. I was young and new to faith, so I took this particular narrative as God’s perfect design. Marriage, I was told by mainstream culture and the church, was the ultimate fulfilling lifestyle.

If, as Clarkson suggests, singleness is equal to suffering and death, and if singleness is in fact not God’s original plan for creation, then I am wildly outside of God’s plan. But I do not feel like I am in a state of perpetual suffering because of my singleness. I do not feel as though it is equal to death. And far more importantly, I do not believe I am rebelliously outside of God’s plan—quite the contrary! It is this cosmic inconsistency that compels me to speak and write in order to encourage others by providing an alternative understanding of singleness.

I believe it is not good for humans to be alone; such a state fails to faithfully reflect the image of the triune God. Our God is a God of community. “It’s not good for a human to be alone” is then profoundly true. To fulfill the lack of companionship, God created community. It is not marriage that God created to satisfy human’s aloneness. Male and female were created so that together they might collaboratively co-rule the creation project that God began.⁷ Can marriage be a part of this collaborative co-ruling? Certainly. Some will marry, but others will not. Some will reproduce biologically, but some will not. The primary purpose of male and female is not that of marriage and producing

4 By “church,” I am primarily referencing conservative American Christianity, since this was the tradition in which I was raised through my late-teenage years.

5 The church tradition that formed my early years of faith would have said “man” instead of “human,” since this tradition placed great significance on God creating male before female.

6 Female, then, was only created to fulfill the life of the male. She was, according to some church traditions, created so that male and female could marry and reproduce.

7 See Gen 1:26. Many interpretations use the word “rule” (e.g., NASB, NIV, NET, NAS, ERV). Others use “reign” (NLT), “have dominion” (ESV, WEB, ASV), “be masters over” (ISV). For centuries, individuals and various communities across the globe (including in my own Western context) have interpreted this Genesis text through an anthropocentric lens. However, I understand this ruling as a reflection of God’s shalom. We as humans are to join together to bring about God’s shalom in all of creation. For more on this shalom interpretation, see N. T. Wright’s work *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

offspring⁸ but to collaborate and faithfully partner with God in mission so that we might together help fulfill the creation project by cultivating shalom in the here and now.⁹

Unmarried women are complete in this alternative interpretation of the Genesis creation narrative. While we have not yet fully lived into God's liberating message, we can know that women should not be confined to the role of mother, be told that we are lesser than men, or remain silent because of our gender. In Christ we are liberated from the pressure to marry and reproduce. Let us rejoice and share this good news! Living into God's original plan allows us to paint with different colors, strokes, and designs that were once unavailable to us. And this is what brings me to the story of Elisabeth van Leeuwarden.

Elisabeth van Leeuwarden

In the early years of Anabaptism, the priority of one's commitment to Christ frequently led individuals to separate from their spouses, families, and communities. A commitment to Christ was considered the one true marriage.¹⁰ If one spouse was not committed to the traditions of Anabaptism and the other was, then separation was considered a viable option. I do not want to suggest that fractures in marriage, families, and communities due to differing faith convictions are righteous, but understanding this practice does provide context as we consider the life of Elisabeth van Leeuwarden.

Born into a family of great importance, Elisabeth received a quality education, which, while not entirely uncommon, was also not the norm for women in the sixteenth century. Her parents placed her in a convent near Leer where she learned, among other things, to read both Dutch and Latin. After hearing of a man who was executed because of his rejection of mass as well as for his adult baptism, Elisabeth began to ferociously study her Latin New Testament.

It is at this point in Elisabeth's life where I personally find her to be a great

8 Biological reproduction was just one facet of the invitation to "be fruitful and multiply" found in the Genesis creation narrative. This may be one reason why both male and female were created. I emphasize this because many assume that the reason male and female were created was solely for the sake of marriage. Again, let me reiterate that *some* were given to marriage and *some* were not. By highlighting this "community" idea of the Genesis narrative, I am hoping to decentralize the marriage-focused interpretations of Genesis 1 and 2.

9 For more on this particular interpretation of the Genesis creation narrative, see John H. Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001).

10 For more on this topic of separation of spouses, families, and communities, see C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 1995).

source of encouragement. As a woman who has chosen to work in the world of academia, I am encouraged by Elisabeth's willingness to question the theological norms (in her story, those norms concern the practices of baptism and mass) and seek out what the New Testament had to say about the matters at hand. It takes a tremendous amount of courage to raise questions, to dare to believe that the ways of Jesus can and do say something different than what you might find practiced in your own environment. Elisabeth practiced this courage. And I strive to do the same.

As she studied, Elisabeth's ideas about following Jesus began to change. Her understandings of baptism and the call to obedience became different from that of her surrounding Catholic community. Suspicion was ignited among the nuns when Elisabeth began questioning the faith values of the community around her. Eventually, Elisabeth was accused of heresy and imprisoned. A decade after her release from prison, she secretly sought help from the milkmaids, and it was decided that she should sneak out dressed as one of them in order to move to a safer place.

In Leer, an Anabaptist family took Elisabeth in and began to instruct her in Anabaptist faith and teachings. While there, her own theological convictions deepened, separating her further from the faith of her childhood and her life in the convent.

Let's step back and think about this for a bit. Experiencing internal theological shifts can be painful and lonely and can result in questions and doubts. I wonder, did Elisabeth ever hesitate? As she began to incorporate the traditions of her new Anabaptist friends, did she have any uncertainty? Did she feel the way I did when I began to clothe myself with Anabaptist convictions and traditions—ones that were so different from those I'd previously been taught?

It was at this time that Elisabeth became a leader in the Anabaptist movement. She was a learned woman, and her years of study allowed her the knowledge and confidence to become an influential teacher. This was the vocation she was called to. Encouraged by Menno Simmons, Elisabeth accepted this challenge and thereby influenced many in their journeys with Christ. She must have had such courage! Not only did she take on radically different theological ideas from those she was raised in, but she also taught them to others! This was no small feat.

The more she spoke out, the more the Anabaptist community feared that Elisabeth might attract the attention of the authorities, and so she was taken to Leeuwarden where she was received by another family of Anabaptists. Despite the community's efforts, Elisabeth was found and again accused of heresy. In their search, officials discovered Elisabeth's New Testament. Because literacy

was frequently granted only to men, these officers assumed the Bible belonged not to Elisabeth but to Menno Simons, who they assumed was her husband!

While in prison, Elisabeth was interrogated before the city council. They asked her (under oath, mind you) whether she had a husband. She responded, “It is not permitted us to swear at all; our words shall be yes, yes, or no, no. I have no husband.”¹¹

Can you imagine this scene? Under fierce interrogation, Elisabeth demonstrated a courage I can only hope for. Instead of cowering before the city council, she responded with an unshakable commitment to her faith in Christ and to her faith community. The interrogation continued:

-We want to know which people have you taught.

-Oh no, my lords, do not leave me alone on this; but ask me about my faith, which I will so gladly tell you.¹²

She had no husband, she did not betray her faith family, and the Latin New Testament was *hers*. Her courage was the scaffolding that held her faithful to Christ and to Anabaptist convictions through both her first and second interrogations. This final round of accusations took place within the torture chamber, where thumbscrews were applied to her thumbs, forefingers, and shins. Even through the pain, Elisabeth held fast. “Help me, O Lord, your poor servant, for you are a helper in time of need,” she cried.¹³

The Lord gave her courage, to be sure, but her body still suffered. Through it all, she remained steadfast in her commitment to Christ, refusing to inform the authorities who had baptized her and protecting the identities of those she had discipled. Elisabeth van Leeuwarden was sentenced to death by drowning in 1549.¹⁴ Nearly five hundred years later, her story continues to influence the lives of many.

As a female leader in the church, I have grown weary of gendered expectations. I am tired of the messages that suggest women cannot and should not lead, teach, or preach. I am exhausted by the gender imbalances found in church leadership. I am sick of being told (whether implicitly or explicitly) that I am not complete until I am married. But, inspired by Elisabeth, I will no longer apologize for utilizing my gifts. I will not apologize for being single

11 C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht, eds., *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), 360.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 362.

14 Ibid., 363.

and not dating. I will respond instead that I am made complete only in Christ.

And for your witness and testimony, Elisabeth van Leeuwarden, I thank you.

Final Thoughts

In Mark 3, Jesus provides a radical re-articulation of family. “Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother” (3:35, ESV). In the context of first-century Jewish culture, this is an outlandish statement. But as Jesus’s words and ways are prone to do, this statement also brings liberation and life to a marginalized community. No longer is marriage and the biological family the path to survival or to participation in God’s family. In this passage, Jesus makes discipleship our *first* calling. Our spiritual family now defines our relationships.

Elisabeth was not married. She had no husband. And while marriage was most certainly the cultural norm of the sixteenth century, she was a sister to many and wedded to Christ. She did not need to wait for a husband to tell her she was complete. She did not need to birth a child to secure her future. She did not wait to live her life. She studied, she taught, she held fast, and she lived faithfully. This is the kind of life I strive to live.