

Luke 22:39-46
Acts 16:6-15

DECIDING TO BE INTIMATE

Perhaps it does not happen anymore, but in former times it was a familiar family ritual that at mealtime, before grace was said, there was hands inspection. I was not raised by permissive parents, and I would not have dreamed of coming to the table without washing my hands. But adults are mysterious creatures. Sometimes you washed your hands and it was okay. Sometimes you washed your hands and it was not good enough. So I have a lot of empathy for little Billy, who was sent from the dinner table back upstairs to the bathroom to wash his hands. He protested that he had already washed them, but his parents informed him that his hands were not clean enough, and after further protest, he was reminded that germs were a danger which could not be allowed at the dinner table. As Billy trudged up the stairs, they heard him muttering somewhat angrily to himself: "Germs and Jesus. Germs and Jesus. That's all I ever hear, and you can't see either one of them."

It is disconcerting, when we are young, to be told that there are powerful and influential things all around us which we cannot see – that, in fact, if we want to have healthy, fruitful, happy lives, we must pay careful attention to them even though we cannot see them. As we grow older, we get somewhat more used to the notion that there are soundwaves, lightwaves, energy beams, creatures, and concepts beyond the range of all our senses. But despite the fact that part of our intellect has been convinced that this is technically true, I think it is often still disconcerting for us adults to be told that there are powerful and influential things all around us which we cannot see. The truth is, *most* of the things which are influential, meaningful, powerful, and most important in our lives are things which we cannot see. Faith, hope, and love, for instance. Fear, guilt, and shame. Motives. Purposes. Greed. Determination. God. We sometimes see what comes from such things, but we cannot see the thing itself. We can see each other's tears, but can we see each other's sorrow? Sometimes we feel or sense each other's affection, but does anybody ever grasp the depth or meaning of love? "*Having eyes you do not see. Having ears you do not hear,*" Jesus said. It is not entirely our fault. Not only is God far beyond our grasp, but so is God's Creation. And even after all these years, we are acquainted with only a small portion of our very own selves. No one here knows their full and true identity.

Germes and Jesus are not the only things little Billy will fail to see in his lifetime. And the truth is, what he does see will end up being the smallest and least important part of his universe.

We have this same struggle in all our relationships, don't we? That is, we start with the outside that we *can* see, and try to grasp more and more of the inside which we cannot see. We trust that somehow the outside will reflect something of the inside, and we are highly annoyed or hurt if that turns out not to be true, especially if we discover that the person was putting up a false front – that is, trying on purpose to present the outside in a way that would mislead us. We call it betrayal.

For the most part, however, we don't get very far while we are trying to “learn” each other. Do not misunderstand: I think courtship is enormously important. It is both serious and sad that it has become a lost art in our society. We have become a nation so impatient and immature that, for the most part, we skip courtship. We go from interest to intimacy in a heartbeat – from dawning friendship to living with each other as if intimacy were a way to get to know each other. No society can survive the damage of such approaches. Individuals are not finding it easy to survive the damage either.

My point, however, is that getting to know each other (courtship) is not the purpose or final stage of any relationship. If the courtship is successful, a relationship moves to intimacy. That is, if the courtship establishes trust, affection, mutual purpose, and caring, then the relationship moves to intimacy – to covenant bond. At that point, the relationship also moves to a different level. Some learning about each other will continue, but that is no longer the focus or purpose. Now the relationship is a connection, and intimacy is the sharing of a way – a pilgrimage. We are in this thing together. We stand or fall together. That is not “getting to know each other” anymore. The introductions are over. Now it is commitment, involvement, and walking life together. In intimacy we share the road, and together we take whatever bumps or beauty are part of the way.

Marriage bonds are not the only bonds. Sexual intimacy is not the only intimacy. I know you know this. At least I know some of you know it. But the principles of relationship apply across the board to all relationships. The nature of the relationship will of course make the nature of the intimacy quite different. Two men deciding whether or not

to form a business partnership are courting each other. They have no interest in sleeping with each other; they just want to make money together. That is a form of intimacy. It requires trust and covenant agreements, and the two lives will walk a road that requires loyalty, sharing, confidence, and patience. And if the two skip the courtship phase, they will probably be in deep trouble. They may never build an intimacy that can survive the journey.

A teacher walks into the classroom on the first day of school. Everybody knows it is a school. Everybody knows the kids are supposed to be students and are there to learn. Everybody knows a teacher is supposed to teach. But I'm sorry, no significant learning will take place unless the teacher and the class go through phases of courtship – establishing trust, making covenant bonds, deciding to get intimate. From the dictionary, “intimate” means “characterized by pronounced closeness of friendship, relationship, or association; deeply personal, private; pertaining to the inmost nature of being – essential, intrinsic; a close or confidential friend.”

Have you decided yet to be intimate with God?

The rules of relationship don't change very much just because it is God. One thing *is* different: Our relationship with God is never a relationship between equals. But that doesn't make as many differences as we might think. First of all, God does not push the inequality thing. God works really hard to guarantee our freedom and individuality. No matter how insulting or wrong we become, God does not dominate us. Actually, *we* are the ones who have to remember that it is not a relationship between equals.

And the rules of normal relationships apply. If we fail to keep appointments; if we constantly interrupt the conversation; if we make it obvious that we are not really paying attention, or that everybody and everything else is more important to us – then I don't know if God gets angry, but I can promise you the relationship will not be worth much. If the only time we ever call home is when we need money; if the only time we show up is when we are too depressed to go anywhere else; if our only interest is in ourselves, and there is no interest or empathy or consideration for God – then I don't know if God gets his feelings hurt, but I can promise you the relationship will not be worth very much.

It's actually nice to know, when we stop to think about it. If we want a friendship with God, we have to use and apply everything we know about friendship to our relationship with God. The rules of relationship apply on all levels of relationship, even with God. Some of us wouldn't dream of treating our friends as inconsiderately or as impersonally as we treat God.

So we go through the same phases of relationship with God that we go through with all our other important relationships. If you court somebody for too long, you know, it starts turning into an insult. "I keep getting to know you better and better, but I still can't make up my mind." Some people have been having a courtship with God that has lasted for years. An occasional date, lots of awkward conversations, a constant barrage of doubts and questions, occasional gifts back and forth – but no commitment. It never moves to intimacy. It never gets to: "Okay, I love and trust you. Let's seal the bond and take the vows and, from now on, it's you and me, Lord, come what may."

Nothing ever really happens in a relationship until it gets intimate. Oh, things get ready to happen. A lot of thinking and talking may go on. But intimacy stops asking about *if* we care and *if* it will work, and moves to shared life together. I "let you in" – in whatever ways are appropriate to the meaning of the relationship – and so the relationship is no longer about asking questions; it is about living life. In courtship, you face each other, fascinate each other, put a lot of time and attention into getting to know each other, and all the other dimensions of life fade into the background while you focus on each other. In marriage – in intimacy – the image shifts: People walk side by side on into the journey. All the life that has been brushed aside comes back into focus, and the two meet it and deal with it together. They are a team – partners in the pilgrimage.

Sometimes young couples talk to me about being in love, and sometimes they try to explain to me why it is important and necessary for them to live together for a while before they decide to get married. I tell them that is baloney, but they insist there is no other way to find out if it will work for them to be together. "How long do you have to be together to find out if it will work?" I ask. "I've been married for over forty years and I don't have the faintest notion whether or not it will *work* – whatever that means. You should never get married until you no longer *care* whether it works." It's "You and me – come what may."

One of the problems of a society that has abandoned courtship is the sad spectacle of couples who get married and then want the marriage to turn into a courtship. That is, they get married hoping it will mean they get to gaze fondly at each other for the rest of their lives, while real life fades into the background. Walking side by side as partners and teammates into whatever challenges and opportunities come has not crossed their minds. They think marriage is about getting to know each other. But that was supposed to happen in the courtship. Oh sure, in marriage there is always more to know, but that is no longer supposed to be the object of the game. Intimacy has already decided, “You are for me, and I am for you. I don’t need to know you any better to know that. All I have is yours as much as mine. Anything I can do to enhance your life, I will do. But essentially, it’s on to our purpose, to the journey – to fulfilling our destinies (children, work, being useful, helping friends, spending our gifts and talents the very best way we can).”

Have you decided yet to be intimate with God?

The most striking thing about all the amazing things about Jesus is His intimacy with God. Always in the background of everything we know about Jesus’ story is this relational intimacy between Jesus and God. We never see the courtship. In Christendom, baptism is the marriage between us and God. Baptism has that meaning in Christianity because it had that meaning for Jesus. We only see Jesus from His baptism on, and it feels like a marriage, a total commitment – a relationship of intimacy. That is, the connection is intimate. Jesus has let God “in.” From then on, the decisions are made together and life is lived together. And the focus is on their purpose, not just on what is good or pleasant or comfortable for Jesus. The object is *not* to be entertained, pampered, convinced, or cajoled. It is life lived together, faced together, handled together. Jesus’ story is unbelievable and beyond belief, except for the unseen partner in the harness beside Him. The storm is calmed or the leper is healed, and the wisdom behind the teachings is so deep that we marvel at what it must have been like to be this intimate with God.

But where are the wife and the children? And how short is the time to enjoy the beauty and peace of Galilee? We all know that Jesus is not getting or insisting on His own way, especially not in that Garden. This has gone way past the courtship. The pilgrimage and purpose have gone far beyond that. We can only gasp and then wonder at the quality of trust, caring, support, and obedience that shines through the intimacy between Jesus and God. And yes, *we* have to decide if we ourselves really want to be intimate with God.

I sometimes need the principles cut down a few levels from Jesus. He is the best illustration, but I sometimes need the contrast of other lives. What about Paul? He also ends up living a life completely incomprehensible if you do not notice the big fellow in the harness there beside him. Paul walks through crisis after crisis, neck-high in controversy and animosity – though like Jesus, he also has the companionship of both male and female friends the likes of which the world has rarely seen. I read earlier from a fairly mundane passage on purpose. We are in the middle of Paul's second missionary journey. At the moment, not much is happening overtly. Paul has revisited the churches he established on the first missionary journey, coming across the middle of what we call Turkey. He wants to go north, it seems. There are some lovely communities up along the shores of the Black Sea. Especially, I think he is eager to visit what we call Istanbul (Byzantium, Constantinople). The Bosphorus Strait is the great corridor between East and West, and Paul's human wisdom tells him that there could be no more effective place from which to spread the faith than from a strong church in this key city.

But Paul has an intimate relationship with the Holy Spirit. That is, he shares things with his partner. This is not just a matter of human wisdom or of doing your own thing, going for the gusto, or being all you can be. Philippi must seem a poor and unexciting choice next to the glorious Byzantium (which Paul never gets to see, though I suspect he very badly wanted to). Besides, there isn't even a synagogue in Philippi, and the only folk Paul can find to preach to are some women down by the river. One of them turns out to be Lydia, who is worth her weight in more than gold. No one can outguess an imagined history, but historians cannot help but wonder what would have happened if Paul's energy had been spent in the region of the Black Sea instead of in Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome. Nothing of Christendom has survived where Paul *wanted* to go.

An idle comment perhaps, but this one is not: Have *you* decided to be intimate with God? Is the courtship over yet? Are you going to go for it? Are you going to let God in?