

Body & Soul Series
Week 2: Created for Intimacy
Sermon

The images that come to mind in the media when we say the word intimacy are starkly different than the intimacy we find in today's scripture text. Most often sleek, shapely, or well-defined bodies intertwined with one another are what the media suggests is intimate. Or two mouths coming together in an overly sexualized kiss. Intimate wear or apparel usually refers to lingerie, bras and underwear for women, but also to a whole line of marketing for men, that I was less aware of...the satin boxers or decorated bikinis that are now available. Yes, most often intimacy is associated with sex, seductive passion, and lots of body contact—and not in the sports reference kind of way.

It's not that intimacy does not include the physical or sensual. Whether that is hugs, a gentle touch, holding hands, kissing, or having sexual intercourse. The book of Ruth is also not without physical intimacy. But the point is that intimacy does not just come in one form, or in one kind of relationship...sexual passions and romantic relationships.

Our dictionary definitions provide a broader view than our media:

1. *a* :intrinsic, essential
b : belonging to or characterizing one's deepest nature
- 2: marked by very close association, contact, or familiarity
- 3 *a* : marked by a warm friendship developing through long association
b : suggesting informal warmth or privacy
- 4: of a very personal or private nature
- 5: euphemism for sexual relations (intimacies)

Out of three translations of the Bible, New Living Translation (NLT), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), and New International Version (NIV), there are only 7 references with the word intimate or intimacy.

3 of them use intimate in the context of friendship:

Job 19:19 (NRSV and NIV):

All my **intimate** friends abhor me, and those whom I loved have turned against me.

Proverbs 7:4 (NRSV)

Say to wisdom, 'You are my sister', and call insight your **intimate** friend,

Deuteronomy 13:6 (NRSV):

If anyone secretly entices you—even if it is your brother...or your most **intimate** friend—

3 of them use intimate or intimacy in reference to God and human's relationship:

1 Chronicles 28:9 (NLT)

"And Solomon, my son, learn to know the God of your ancestors **intimately**.

Amos 3:2 (NLT)

God speaking to the Israelites: "From among all the families on the earth, I have been **intimate** with you alone."

Job 29:4 (NIV)

Oh, for the days when I was in my prime, when God's **intimate** friendship blessed my house,

And only once is it used to describe sexual relationships:

Hosea 3:3

Then I told her, "You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be **intimate** with any man, and I will behave the same way toward you."

Intimacy is not restricted to romance or sex. The Biblical view of intimacy is based in relationships. Ones that are lasting and deep. That involve risk and commitment. That go the second, third, and fourth mile for one another. Relationships that are based on steadfast love, that occasionally include what we would call romantic love. Relationships that aren't perfect or uncomplicated. But that are built around respect, honesty, vulnerability, grace, and forgiveness.

Relationships such as

Daniel and his friends living in the Babylonian empire,
David and Jonathan,
Jesus and his close disciples (both women and men),
Ruth and Naomi, and Ruth and Boaz.

The book of Ruth shows us healthy, intimate relationships. Ones that are based on what is translated as steadfast love, loyalty, or faithfulness. The Hebrew word is hesed. There really isn't an English word that fits the whole meaning of hesed. Terms such as loyal devotion, steadfast love, kindness, and faithfulness all refer to an aspect of hesed. It is used throughout the Old Testament, often referring to an act of hesed. Sometimes it is in reference to God's hesed, or steadfast love, for us. At other times it references a commitment to another or loyal help of one's kin or neighbor.

In the woman, Ruth, we see an act of hesed as she commits herself to her mother-in-law. In reality, she seems to disobey or go against what her elder, Naomi, tells her to do. Yet does so for a higher purpose. The term hesed infers that the action of Ruth is not for her own advantage, but out of commitment to Naomi. Ruth would gain more benefit in going back to her own family, her own people. She would have a chance as a young widow to marry again, or at the least be taken back under her family's care...since she as a woman did not have the option to make their own living. Yet, Ruth says...

"Where you go I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

She is willing to be vulnerable...take a risk in bonding herself to an older widow with little no hope for a future...bonding herself in loyalty to the one in trouble.

This one act multiplies and grows in this story of Ruth:

- Ruth gleaned grain from Boaz's field. He has heard what she has done for her mother-in-law, Naomi, and makes sure there is enough grain left behind for them. An act of hesed.
- Later, Naomi gives Ruth a chance for security rather than the uncertainty of widowhood that has been her reality. Naomi comes up with a plan for Ruth to present herself to Boaz, inviting him to be the kinsman who redeems Naomi's family line by marrying Ruth. It puts Ruth in a vulnerable place, yet one that may secure an improved future for her, and hence for Naomi as well.
- Boaz accepts Ruth's invitation, as such, and they marry and have a son Obed.

Ruth's beginning act of hesed has now flowered and impacted the broader community as well. Healthy intimate relationships are contagious.

The book of Ruth moves from famine, grief, and isolation, to abundance, connection, and belonging. In this word of hope we see the struggles and heartaches of life along with the way meaningful connection creates sustenance.

We were created to be connected not in total isolation. But this is not the hyper-connected, yet somewhat superficial world of social networking. This need for relationship isn't really filled by having hundreds of friends on Facebook, or communicating mainly through blogs, emails, texts, or tweets. Humans were created with a desire for intimacy and belonging that needs more than our technology can give.

And in case it's not clear yet...by intimacy, I mean a connection that is meaningful and goes beneath the surface of our walls. Someone with whom we can begin to show our real self, and realize that they aren't going to turn away. Someone, or a group, where we also give space for the other to be real and open with us. A relationship that involves lots of grace and care. This can be in close friendships, family relationships, romantic or marriage relationships, as well as a church community.

In an article written in 1993 (yet still very relevant), Eugene Peterson names our culture as a secular culture. Here's how he defines that:

"A secular culture is a culture reduced to *thing* and *function*...[we think] it is wonderful to have all these *things* coming our way, without having to worry about their nature or purpose. And it is wonderful to have all this incredible freedom to *do* so much, without bothering about relationships or meaning. But after a few years of this our delight diminishes as we find ourselves lonely among the things and bored with our freedom."

He goes on to say:

"People begin to see that secularism marginalizes and eventually obliterates the two essentials of human fullness: intimacy and transcendence. Intimacy: we want to experience human love and trust and joy. Transcendence: we want to experience divine love and trust and joy...we long for a human touch, for someone who knows our name. We hunger for divine meaning, someone who will bless us. And so spirituality, a fusion of intimacy and transcendence, overnight becomes a passion for millions of North Americans. It should be no surprise that a people so badly trained in intimacy and transcendence might not do too well in their quest. Most anything at hand that gives a feeling of closeness—whether genitals or cocaine—will do for intimacy. And most anything exotic that induces a sense of mystery—from mantras to river rafting—will do for transcendence." ("Spirit Quest" by Eugene Peterson, *Christianity Today*, Nov.8, 1993)

We too know this narrative of intimacy gone shallow and connection being quick and sweet. We know the busyness of life that makes deep connection difficult. We know what it feels like to be in a crowd of people and be lonely. We may be currently struggling with what intimacy and meaningful connection feel like in our lives. When we pause enough, we know that there must be more to life; more to this narrative of intimacy.

Through the two creation accounts in Genesis:

We are told that we are blessed and beautiful in God's eyes...in our bodies, mind, and soul. With responsibility to be the bearer of God's image; caring for God's creation and mindful of respecting that image in our fellow human beings.

We are told that we are not only to care for creation, but in a way that we are linked with it...as the first human was made from the dust of the earth.

We are told that we are dependent on and linked to our Creator as humankind was made alive by the passionate and life-giving breath of God.

We are told that we are created to be connected to one another as human beings...as the second human was made from the first...bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.

We are told that God relates to us in intimate ways: getting her hands dirty, so to speak, as she molds us from dust and ribs. Enjoying our company, as he walks with us in the garden. God knows we have faults, will mess up, and will also turn away. But the steadfast love or hesed of our Creator continues. May we continue to find that to be true as we navigate our own realities and intimacy gone awry.

This morning we will hear from Daniel and Laurie about how they experience intimate relationships and meaningful connections. They do not speak for all men or all women, but from their own unique perspective. One which we may find similarities and differences. Through hearing one another's unique stories we open ourselves up to seeing how our sexuality affects and shapes our lives.

~ Written by Lorie Hershey
May 15, 2011