

Created for Intimacy

Texts: Genesis 1:26-31; 2:18-25; Psalm 139; Book of Ruth; John 1:14

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."¹

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken."²

Lord, you made my whole being; you formed me in my mother's body. I praise you because you made me in an amazing and wonderful way. What you have done is wonderful. I know this very well.³

These familiar verses are from the first two chapters of Genesis and Psalm 139. We read them back in February when talking about being stewards of our health – both physical and mental, in May when the topic was stewardship of creation, and again in June with sermons on singleness and marriage.

Today, we read them another time as we continue our summer theme of human relationships. For the next three Sundays, the topic will be healthy sexuality. This series is based a resource from MennoMedia titled *Body and Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God*.

Here's the way the authors introduce *Body & Soul*.⁴ Sex is all around us. Children learn about it in school and talk about it in the hallways. Adults and teenagers joke about it. Often, our society's sex talk is loaded with values that are not healthy – unhealthy values concerning body image, relationships, or sexual practices.

We hear about sex at work, at school, in the media, and in counseling offices. Unfortunately, sexuality is one of the least talked-about issues in many congregations. Or, when sex is mentioned, the church has surrounded our physical selves and desires with shame. For many churches, the only sexual topic that has been discussed in recent years is one that has caused division and pain: homosexuality. But on other topics related to our bodies, or our sexual longings and practices, silence is too often the rule.

What keeps God's people from talking about our bodies, our unique identities as male and female, our habits of thinking and acting sexually? After all, the Bible talks a lot about sexuality. We are created male and female in God's image, and, like the rest of God's creatures, we are encouraged to *be fruitful and multiply*.⁵ The Bible honors our human drive to be in relationship with others. It tells

¹ Genesis 1:26a, 27, *New Revised Standard Version*

² Genesis 2:18, 23, *New Revised Standard Version*

³ Psalm 139:13-14, *New Century Version*

⁴ *Body and Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God, Worship Leader Guide*, Faith and Life Resources (MennoMedia), 2010, p. 2; Leonard Beechy, *Body and Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God, Adult Study Leader Guide*, Faith and Life Resources (MennoMedia), 2010, pp. 5-6.

⁵ Genesis 1:26-28

several stories of God honored romances.⁶ The Song of Solomon is a celebration of erotic love. The Bible refers to husband-wife relationships as a picture of God's relationship with Israel or Christ's relationship with the church.⁷ The end-time victory of God is pictured as a marriage celebration.⁸

At the time John's Gospel was written, many religious people would have agreed fully that the Word was in the beginning, that it was with God, that it was God, that it was operating in the creation of all things. They would have nodded all the way through the beginning of John's first chapter until they were stopped short at verse 14: *And the Word became flesh and lived among us*. To them flesh was a debased substance unfit for association with the divine. They were horrified at the very notion that the revelation of the eternal God would be embodied in the flesh and blood of Jesus. Yet John was indeed reaffirming God's honoring of the body – including Jesus' body – as the bearer of God's image. So if the Bible can celebrate the body, sex, and sexuality, God's people can, too!

Body and Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God provides an introduction to four basic themes related to sexuality: our bodies and how we see them; our human need for intimacy in our relationships; the place of genital-sexual expression; and the ultimate "holy desire" that is the foundation of our relationships with God and with others. The focus is on God's wonderful intent for healthy sexuality. The tone is one of celebration. While we acknowledge and lament sexual sin and abuses of sexuality, we seek most of all to uncover the gifts and joys of our sexuality as God meant them to be.

In creating us, God gave us physical bodies and pronounced them good. The pleasures of food, touch, work, play, sight, sound, and sexual love are gifts of a loving God, sprung from the ecstatic generosity of creation. Sexuality and bodies are God's ideas, and the least we can do is to join our voices with God's in agreeing that they are *very good*.

It's not good for us to be alone.⁹ God said this at our creation, and we have felt it ever since. We have a built-in longing for relationship. This longing defines our sexuality.

In his book *The Holy Longing: The Search for Christian Spirituality*, Ronald Rolheiser makes this point clear: *Sexuality is an all-encompassing energy inside of us. In one sense, it is identifiable with the principle of life itself. It is the drive for love, communion, community, friendship, family, affection, wholeness, consummation, creativity, self-perpetuation, immortality, joy, delight, humor, and self-transcendence. Genitality, having sex, is only one aspect of that larger reality of sexuality, albeit a very important one.*¹⁰

Traditionally, the Christian church reserves intimacy expressed through genitality, having sex, for those who declare their commitment to each other before God and the community in marriage. But God's intention is that life-giving, emotionally intimate relationships are for every person, regardless of their marital status, age, gender, sexual orientation, or physical or mental ability.

The book of Ruth offers us a portrait gallery of life-giving relationships. The story of Ruth and Naomi begins with painful hungers of body and soul: famine, dislocation, death, and abandonment. It ends with food, welcome, marriage, procreation, and a community strong enough to bridge ages, ethnicities, and generations.

⁶ Such as Jacob and Rachel or Ruth and Boaz

⁷ Hosea 2:16-20; Ephesians 5:25-30

⁸ Revelation 19:7

⁹ Much of what follows comes from Leonard Beechy, *Body and Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God, Adult Study Leader Guide*, Faith and Life Resources (MennoMedia), 2010, pp. 10-11; Joel Miller, *Body and Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God, Worship Leader Guide*, Faith and Life Resources (MennoMedia), 2010, pp. 14-15; and Karla Stoltzfus Detweiler, *Body and Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God, Youth Study Leader Guide*, Faith and Life Resources (MennoMedia), 2010, pp. 11-13.

¹⁰ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*, Doubleday, 1999, pp. 194-195.

The book of Ruth is a rich story of intimate relationships. Significantly, the core relationship of the story is not a romantic relationship between a man and a woman, but the committed love between a young woman, Ruth, and her mother-in-law, Naomi. Their story testifies to the immense power of healthy, intimate relationships to spawn more healthy relationships, which contribute to a healthy community.

The force that drives this relationship is *hesed*, a Hebrew word too rich to translate with a single word. *Hesed* is loyalty-love, covenant-love, love-with-a-promise. It includes mercy, grace, kindness, goodness, and benevolence. It's the love that God extends to humanity, the love that is the fabric of human relationships and human community. It runs like theme music through the story of Ruth. Her pledge to Naomi may be the most beautiful and poetic expression of *hesed* found in the Bible.¹¹ *Hesed* is the quality in Ruth that most arouses the admiration of Boaz.¹² Their union offers promise to the whole family of Israel, a multi-generational blessing out of God's undying *hesed*.

The story of David and Jonathan¹³ and the story of Jesus and his friendship with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus¹⁴ give us further insight into the different ways relationships offer us life-giving intimacy and connectedness. These relationships are built on a sense of equality, respect, and mutual trust – without one friend lording it over another. Each is able to share deeply with the other on an emotional level.

Sometimes the partners make sacrifices for each other. David, for example, risks his safety to see Jonathan, while Jonathan's friendship with David costs him his father's favor, and, most of all, the throne to which he is entitled.

Jesus' journey to restore the life of his friend Lazarus is an emotionally wrenching experience. He weeps with Lazarus's sisters. The sisters, Mary and Martha, are free to express their own anguish of Jesus' delay in coming.

These stories show that intimate relationships are the most valuable of earthly possessions. They bring us life because they reach into our most vulnerable selves. We're hardwired for intimacy. Each of us has a need for connection—physical, emotional, and spiritual—with other humans. We need meaningful, loving relationships as much as we need water and food.

Popular culture regularly fails to distinguish between intimacy and sex. Too often Hollywood portrays people seeking—and apparently finding—intimacy through sexual intercourse. But equation of sex and intimacy is harmful to the development of healthy, fulfilling relationships. There is such a thing as sex without intimacy. And intimacy is possible without sex.

We can fulfill our needs for intimacy in friendships that are marked by trust, care, respect, fun, and non-sexual physical expressions of affection. Intimacy involves vulnerability and trust, risk and grace – qualities that take mutual commitment and that become more mature with experience. Intimacy also requires qualities that can sometimes be hard to find in our busy culture: time, commitment, and perseverance. All people, whether they are single, married, widowed, divorced, young, or old, need intimate relationships in order to live satisfying lives. Not every relationship we have can be intimate, but we can and should nurture intimacy in select friendships.

A vibrant, intimate relationship will likely have certain characteristics.¹⁵ I've mentioned most of these already, but I thought it might be helpful to look at a recipe for intimacy.

¹¹ Ruth 1:16-17

¹² Ruth 2:11; 3:10

¹³ 1 Samuel 18:1-4; 20:1-42.

¹⁴ John 11

¹⁵ Recipe comes from Karla Stoltzfus Detweiler, *Body and Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God, Youth Study Leader Guide*, Faith and Life Resources (MennoMedia), 2010, p. 14; intimacy ingredients come from Willard Krabill, "The Gift of Intimacy," in *Sexuality: God's Gift*, 2nd ed., ed. Anne Krabill Hershberger, Herald Press, 2010, pp. 57-62.

Friendship (1 c. crunchy peanut butter): The first ingredient and step in building an intimate relationship is friendship. Some of the greatest intimacies in the world are between people who for one reason or another are not dating, engaged, nor do they intend to be married. They just enjoy being together. Of course, friendship is an important characteristic of couples as well.

Acceptance (½ c. powdered milk): In an intimate relationship, both people need to be accepted for who he or she is as a person. An intimate friend sends a clear and unconditional message: *You are worthwhile, and valuable.*

Communication (½ c. raisins): Open, honest communication is absolutely essential for developing an intimate relationship. There must be no deceit or pretending, no lies, and no hidden agenda. Both people must be willing to bare their souls.

Trust (½ c. chocolate chips): This openness and vulnerability can happen only in the presence of trust. To become intimate with someone is risky. Dependability, loyalty, and honesty all build the trust that we need before we are willing to risk sharing our deepest feelings.

Equality (1 T. flax seeds): Equality enhances the development of trust and communication. Domination of one party in a relationship destroys intimacy. There can be no coercion, no power play, no manipulation, and no using the other for selfish purposes.

Shared values (1/8 c. sesame seeds): The greatest intimacy is possible between people who have shared values—those who share similar life goals and have a similar worldview.

Affection (1/8 c. wheat germ): Affection is an ingredient of intimacy. Affection includes gentle feelings of fondness, joy in each other's presence, compassion when the other person is hurting, and words of encouragement for one another.

Touch (1 t. vanilla): Touch can be another important ingredient – as long as it is affirming touch, not exploiting touch. Touch is affirming only if it is clearly invited and welcomed by both people. Affirming touch makes a person feel valued and not used. Touch, especially sexual touch, in the absence of the other ingredients does not – actually, can not – create intimacy. Exploitive touch destroys trust and intimacy.

Time (1/8 t. salt): To develop true intimacy takes lots of time. It's a process, a dynamic growing experience. It takes time to be fully available to other persons, to share their joys and hear their suffering.

Commitment (1/3 c. honey): Commitment is the final ingredient and step. True intimacy requires commitment, the kind of loving commitment that keeps us present for and involved with another person, that keeps us caring and loving over time whether the road is smooth or rough and difficult. This is the *hesed* demonstrated in the story of Ruth and Naomi.

If you mix the edible ingredients of the recipe together, you create a version of peanut butter fudge. Some of these ingredients might be tolerable alone, but all together, they make a more delicious treat than any single one. So also with the ingredients of intimacy.

Of course, this analogy is limited. While some of the ingredients of this recipe do taste yummy alone, a relationship will likely lack true intimacy if any one ingredient is completely absent. The quantities and expression of these ingredients vary from one relationship to another. And we know that eating this peanut butter fudge would be dangerous for some people. Similarly, intimacy may be unthinkable for some people, especially for someone who has been victimized and traumatized by physical or sexual abuse. For them, building trust would be one of the first steps in creating intimacy. Other ingredients could be added over time.

We are created for intimacy. I pray that each of you here has found the physical, emotional, and spiritual connection you need with other humans. I hope, I trust that this community, Salina Mennonite Church, is one place you find that connection. May it be so.