

Intimacy

Father James Chelich - February 2012

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The Unexpected intimacy of God...

In God's interaction with us we gain insight and wisdom about ourselves and the relational world we build. Christian faith teaches that God became "flesh" (became human) in order to draw near us. How God draws near to us as a human, how God acts to establish intimacy with us, has much to teach us about the way we become intimate with one another.

Setting Self aside, God *seeks* us out – on our own terms. He *finds* us in all the lovely and not so lovely places in life into which we walk, run or stumble. Finding us, God *speaks to our heart* and offers us a life in communion with His own. This communion heals, regenerates and makes us whole. God created us for the sheer joy of His delight in experiencing life in us and expressing His love through us. This, as nothing else, brings us back to our true self and makes us whole.

Jesus is God entering the human world to seek and find us. The Gospels record him doing this. He has remained present in the world, drawing near to women and men, and speaking to their hearts ever since. He summarizes his mission and describes God's intimacy with humanity in a short parable:

What is your opinion? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go in search of the stray? And if he finds it, amen, I say to you, he rejoices more over it than over the ninety-nine that did not stray. In just the same way, it is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost. Matthew 18:12-14

...becomes the pattern for human intimacy.

The essence of intimacy is to *seek out* and *find*, and then *speak to the heart* of another.

1.
The First Act of Human Intimacy:
To Seek Out and Find Another

God's intimacy with us defines and establishes the pattern of human intimacy between us. First and foremost, human intimacy is the act by which we "get out of ourselves." Setting self aside (with all of my sharply defined opinions about things and ways of doing things), I venture to seek out and find another, through whose eyes I can gain a different perspective on things, through whose heart I can experience life in greater depth, through whose labors I can discover a fresh way of engaging the world. When another receives my "seeking" and allows me to "find" them in these ways, intimacy is born between us. As this happens, a communion is established between my life and theirs. If I am healthy of body, mind and spirit, this communion will result in new energy in both of us for the service of those people and things we are individually given to care for in this world. If my body, mind and spirit are not healthy, our connection with each other will result in us violating each other's integrity, draining each other's energy, and doing serious mental, emotional, spiritual and even physical damage to each other.

Keeping your body, mind and spirit healthy is a responsibility that cannot be delegated to another. Any attempt to do so in the name of intimacy will result only in a consuming dependency. Keeping your body, mind and spirit healthy is what you must do for yourself. It is the gift you bear to those with whom you share intimacy. They can support you in your efforts to become and remain healthy, but they cannot do it for you. This is something you can ask only of your intimacy with God. When you seek out God, when you allow yourself to be found by Him and allow Him to enter into you, to move in you, with you and through you, you find your body, mind and spirit restored to right order. You are then ready to move out and seek intimacy with another.

Intimacy is always a decision. I decide to leave the confines of myself and seek out another. I decide that I will allow myself to be found by the one that seeks me. As I indicated above, not everyone is capable of this or willing to do this. In exploring human relationship this is one of the first and most important things to know about yourself and another. Intimacy blossoms into love when I am able to say: "This is a person I am committed to seek out and find, this is a person I will allow to find me." When friends mutually establish intimacy between them in this way, it is impossible for them to "fall out" of love and friendship. You just can't! You cannot fall out of love or friendship with someone who is consistently going out of their way to seek you out and find you for the sheer joy of seeing the world through your eyes and experiencing the world through your mind and heart.

The withdrawal of intimacy is also a decision. "We just fell out of love," is a convenient lie we tell ourselves and others to cover up the fact that we have *decided* to withdraw intimacy from someone. Why do people give up? Usually because their expectations of how another would "be there" for them were not fulfilled. They expected to be sought out in a certain way (phone calls, notes, gifts, attention shown), and were

disappointed. They expected to be found (listened to, responded to, shared with) in a certain way, and were disappointed. Sometimes a person withdraws intimacy because the other withdrew it first. But usually it is because one has projected on to the other an *expectation* that the other would “be” and “be there” for me in a certain way, and were repeatedly disappointed. The power of idealization (making a person in our mind into someone they are not) cannot be underestimated.

This can be seen in couples planning to get married. As single individuals they built up such a strong image in their mind of “Mr. or Miss Right,” and fixed it in their head so completely that it blinds them to the reality of who another person is. When they meet someone that just slightly “fits the bill,” they project the rest of the ideal on to them. They will not see the other for who the other really is and how they really are. They are certain that the other is exactly the way they want them to be. Once married, this is the way they will expect them to be. They are disappointed and feel betrayed by the other, even though that was never who the other was, nor was it ever how they were. For the crime of not being who I wanted and expected you to be, intimacy is withdrawn,

People who have forged a deep connection with God in prayer, and enter into a deep experience of communion with God in worship have a great advantage in trying to establish this first level of intimacy. They do not expect another human being to be and “be there” for them in ways that only God can. God already is. This leaves them free to receive the seeking and finding of others as others are: flawed and imperfect human beings like themselves.

This first and fundamental level of human intimacy wants nothing more than the delight of seeing the world through another’s eyes, reflecting on the world through another’s mind, experiencing life through another’s heart. Because this is so, it is not exclusive to relationships between men and women. It applies to all human relationship: friends of the same and opposite sex, fathers and sons, brothers and sisters. Everyone should strive to have a number of people with whom they share human intimacy at this level. Not to establish and cultivate this act of intimacy with a rich variety of people of the same and opposite sex, invites an ever growing feeling of loneliness and isolation.

If you allow it to, the press of life and swirl of events around you will drive you into a frame of mind that is reactive to everyone and everything. The constant press and pull of commitments and activity will arrange your life for you, and the arrangement will always be one that defeats intimacy. Intimacy is a creative interpersonal act that *intentionally* and *willfully* carves out space and establishes itself in the face of the press of the world. It is important to know this.

In relationships between men and women, this act of intimacy is what a man and woman establish between them and *bring to* the covenant of marriage. It does not, however, work the other way around. Getting married to someone does not establish intimacy between them. The first vow of marriage is for a man and a woman to say to each other: “You are the man (the woman) I vow to seek out and find each day. Nothing

is more important to me than to do this in some way every day. I will remove anything in my life that comes in the way of my being able to do it. I will change anything in the pattern of my activity that interferes with it. I ask my family and friends to call me to accountability if I neglect it.” It is essential that this first act of intimacy be established between two people before they are married. If it is not, or if they allow it to die once they are married, they lay themselves open to infidelity and adultery. There will always be someone at the office or in one’s social circle who will begin to be seen as valuing me more than my spouse, because they listen to me, are interested in me, ask about me, share their thoughts and feelings with me. My spouse doesn’t. So why am I with them anyway?

Question for Those Leading a Single Life

- Have I established this act of intimacy with anyone?
If not, why? What stands in the way?
- Can I enjoy letting people be themselves and viewing the world through their eyes, without expectation of “something more?”
- Do I approach people who might want to get to know me with large and sharply defined expectations of who they have to be, and how they have to “be there” for me?
- Have I enriched my interpersonal life with a variety of individuals with whom I enjoy this intimacy?

Questions for Those Who Are Married

- Have you established this act of intimacy between you and your spouse?
- Is it a daily part of your life together? How?
- If it is not, what are you willing to do about it?
- What has to change in your routine to make it possible?
- If you find there is no time for it, “what has to go” in order for you to make the time?

2.

The Second Act of Intimacy: To Speak to the Best Self in Another

The Gospels show us even more about intimacy. When Jesus sought out and found another, he spoke to their heart – to their character as a woman or man. (John 4:28-29) He did so in a way that spoke to the “best self” in them. This produced different reactions in different individuals. Some people withdrew from Jesus. Others became hostile toward him because his words revealed the truth about themselves they didn’t want to hear. Some people, however, allowed his words to bring them to an accurate view of the kind of woman or man they had become – often broken, wounded and even

venial. At the same time, his words gave them a new and unexpected look at the woman or man they were created to be – their “best self.” To those who opened their hearts to him, Jesus said: “Come, follow me.” Those who did, quickly found themselves becoming that new self.

The second act of human intimacy is to speak to the heart of another. This act of human intimacy is a step beyond the first. A person vests another they have come to know and trust with the right to speak to their “best self”: to the best man or woman they can be, and the good they can do. This act of intimacy requires a measure of artful care. No one wants another (even when they have given them the right to so address them) trampling all over their character harshly or in a demeaning way. Speaking to the “best self” in another is engaged at a calm moment, and with the simple invitation: “We need to talk. When is a good time?”

How does this build intimacy? When you allow another to speak to your “best self” as a man or woman, you are allowing him or her to play a role in the person you become. The “who” you become will have their love and concern woven into it. It is important to remember, however, that God alone is infallible. Human beings are not. When you allow God’s word to speak to your “best self,” you know that God is “right on” in what he shows you about yourself and what he asks you to become. When you allow another human being to speak to your “best self,” they offer you a *perspective* of who you are and what you might be becoming. Their perspective might be “right on.” It might be “somewhat on.” It might even be “off.” The intimacy of speaking to the life of another says what it is *noticing* about the other, how the other *appears* to be changing, and what they *appear* to be becoming. It is always clear about the potential for good it sees in the other, and encourages them to fulfill this potential. This act of intimacy asks another to listen and think about what they say, to “try it on” and “see if it fits.” A person speaking to the life of another never insists that their perspective has to be “right.” It is a *perspective*, offered in love. It might or might not be “right.” This second act of human intimacy wants the other to become their “best self,” more than it wants to be “right” about them.

People who are able to enter into a trusting relationship with God, and who allow God’s word to “speak to” both the reality of who and what they are, as well as to the best person they can become, have a great advantage in establishing this second level of intimacy with others. Having allowed God to address them with the *truth*, they are more comfortable allowing a trusted other to address them with their *perspective*. This leaves them free to receive and “try on” the perspective of another, fallible and incomplete though it might be.

Everyone should strive to have one or two people with whom they share human intimacy at this level – individuals they vest with the right to speak to their “best self.” Not to establish and cultivate this act of intimacy with someone lays your life open to the feeling of always needing to be self-sufficient and having to “go it alone.”

Friends may or may not move beyond the first bond of intimacy to develop this second bond. Not all intimate relationship needs to. Those entering the covenant of marriage, however, must establish and share this second bond of intimacy with each other. It is their second marriage vow: “This is the woman (the man) I vest with the right to speak to who I am and the best I can be.” To fail to establish this intimacy between them is to invite disaster in their marriage. Living so proximate to each other’s lives day to day, they will find themselves at times impatient and frustrated with the each other. If they do not share the intimacy of speaking to the best in each other, their comments to and about each other will progressively become reactive: outbursts done in moments of frustration or anger. These outbursts will be sarcastic, cutting, demeaning, and humiliating. A lot of damage will be done, and at some point they will find themselves compelled to distance themselves from one another to protect themselves.

Questions for Those Leading a Single Life

- Is there anyone in your life that you have vested with the right to speak to your best self as a woman or man?
- Is there anything in your personality or temperament that resists this?
- Do you need and are you willing to sit down and talk to someone about this?
- If you share this level of intimacy with someone, does your perspective of them always have to be accepted by them as “right?”
- Can you honestly say that you want more for them to be their Best Self than you want to be “right” about them?

Questions for Those Who Are Married

- Have you vested your spouse with the right to “speak to your Best Self” as a man or woman?
- Does your spouse know that you have?
- Is it time to make or renew this vow with each other?

Physical Expression of Intimacy

Christian faith lays out two truths important for understanding human relationship. They are found in the first chapters of the Book of Genesis, which is a sort of constitution of human dignity and the human condition.

The LORD God formed the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. Genesis 2:7

In this passage we are taught that we are embodied souls: The soul (the “who” that we are) expresses itself through a material body.

*God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply.
Genesis 1:28*

In this passage we are taught that we are sexual. We are equipped to procreate, and there is in us the drive to procreate.

In regard to this second truth, the Christian faith lays out a third truth, which brings us even deeper insight into being sexual. Within each act of human procreation, God acts to create an immortal soul. It is as if the scene in Genesis 2:7, described above, takes place again with each conception. Just as God leaned over the newly formed body of Adam, God leans over the bodies of a man and woman in sexual union and the human embryo newly formed between them, and breathes into that embryo an immortal soul – a human “who” that now is. This is why Catholic Faith teaches that God has a personal claim on human procreation. It also explains why God cares about how genital sex is used and human procreation comes about.

Our soul (the “who” we are) expresses itself through our body. The acts that establish intimacy between people are expressed with our body: physically bringing yourself into proximity with another and using your voice to speak to them. The fruit of human intimacy – the bond of love or communion established between two people – is also expressed with our body: a hand on the shoulder, an arm around the waist, a hug, a kiss on the cheek, a pat on the back, holding hands, sitting close to one another. All of these physically express a desire either to form a bond or to celebrate a bond of intimacy already formed with another. They “say:” “I am here for you,” “You are delightful to me,” “You are important to me,” “I am devoted to you.” Nothing about these physical expressions of intimacy are *necessarily* sexual. They do not *necessarily* say that I want to arouse you and engage in genital sex with you. On the other hand, all of them can be sexual. When this is the case, these physical expressions become “foreplay” to the end of having genital sex. The tragedy in our society is that many people have grown up understanding these physical expressions of intimacy *only to be* a prelude to having sex with someone. If they only experience them as foreplay, then in their mind they can only mean: “Someone wants to have sex with me.” There is no thought that they can simply express human warmth, a desire to be “present” to another, that “I am cared for” without want of something more.

When these physical expressions are taken *solely* as foreplay to genital sex, they are no longer available to convey the feeling of being accepted in my integrity, valued for who I am, connected in a warm and even tender way to the people in the human world that surrounds me. As a result, the conviction builds, both in the mind of the individual and in social culture, that a person’s sense of isolation from others and physical distance from others can only be overcome by having sex. Human life is incredibly impoverished if one does not experience physical expressions of intimacy that are not charged with the drive to sexual union. Family life is impoverished, friendship is impoverished, and marriage itself is impoverished if these expressions of physical warmth and tenderness are seen only as mechanisms for sexual arousal to the end of having sexual intercourse.

Non-erotically charged expressions of physical intimacy are absolutely essential to the life of a single man or woman. Shared in many, varying ways among one's network of intimate friends and companions, a garment of human warmth, tenderness and connectedness is woven which defeats loneliness and establishes a communion of life.

Christian faith has always called for chastity before marriage. It allows both fundamental *acts of human intimacy* to become firmly established between a man and woman, and it provides time and emotional space for non-erotically charged *physical expressions of intimacy* to develop and be employed between them. This significantly strengthens the chances for their marriage to survive. A man and woman must come to the covenant of marriage with both of the essential *acts* that establish intimacy (Seeking and Finding and Speaking to the Heart of Another) well established, and with a full tool kit of non-erotically charged physical *expressions* of intimacy ready to be employed between them. There will be times and seasons when genital sex will not be possible. This should not signal a void of tenderness or the death of intimacy.

Genital sex cannot establish intimacy. If intimacy is not brought to genital sex, sex will never find it. When intimacy is brought to sex in the covenant of marriage, sex becomes yet another rich *expression* of intimacy. Sex, alone, cannot sustain the covenant of marriage. Intimacy can – even long after genital sex is no longer possible.

Questions for Those Leading a Single Life

Have you cultivated a variety of non-erotically changed physical expressions of intimacy that enrich your relationships with your family, friends and close companions?

Questions for Those Who Are Married

Have we cultivated between us a variety of non-erotically charged, physical expressions of intimacy to enrich our relationship?

Do we employ them often, and allow our children to see us employ them?

Is genital sex an *expression* of the intimacy we have established between us, or is genital sex the sole confine of our intimacy?