

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 12, 2012
Fr. Tom Elliott

The Importance of Intimacy

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46
Psalm 32
1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1
Mark 1:40-45

Last week, God spoke to me through a piece of chocolate. Last Wednesday, Mike and Felicia Hathaway gave me a piece of Dove chocolate. The inside of the wrapper said, “Remember your first crush.” I didn’t think too much about it until the next morning in prayer. It seemed like that was what God wanted to talk with me about. As I sat in prayer, reminiscing about the crush I had on Desiree in the 5th grade, I thought about the role of that love has played in my life.

I dated a lot in high school. There was one particular girl that I went steady with for about a year and a half. During that time, she would occasionally say, “I love you.” My response was always, “Okay...” or “Oh...” It was obvious that this was *not* the response she was looking for. One day, she asked me, “Why do you never tell me that you love me?” I thought the reason was because I understood the importance of love and did not want to use the phrase in a flippant and sophomoric way. What I learned in prayer this week was that my reason was a lie.

The real reason that I didn’t feel comfortable telling my girlfriend, “I love you,” was because I had built up walls around my identity in order to keep people away. In high school, I didn’t truly believe that what I had to share with other people was good enough. I didn’t feel like other people would truly love or accept me if they knew who I really was. In the end, I married the one woman who I thought would accept me the most—the Bride of Christ, the Church. During my twelve years of priesthood, she has taught me a lot about love and has challenged me to let the walls of my own insecurities come down. She has helped me to learn that every human being is looking for one thing in life—intimacy.

Intimacy is more than just love. It is an experience of being loved, accepted, cherished, cared for, and forgiven. Intimacy means that our beloved deeply knows us and that we deeply know our beloved. Every authentic vocation is an invitation into intimacy with God and other people. Every vocation challenges us to let our defense mechanisms collapse and to let ourselves be both vulnerable and transparent. This is not an easy thing to do. It requires us to confront some parts of ourselves that can be both frightening and confusing. However, when we’re courageous enough to confront the barriers that keep us from intimacy, some amazing things happen!

Since this is World Marriage Day, I want to share with you three steps toward experiencing deeper intimacy in your marriage. While I’ll talk about these in the context of marriage, they can be applied to every life and vocation.

Step One: Share with Your Beloved

In the book of Hosea, God describes His love for us as an intimate sharing, “I will allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart.” Intimacy requires us to communicate deeply with our beloved.

In the movie, “Yes, Man” and main character, Carl (played by Jim Carey), had a personal epiphany about intimacy and told his girlfriend, Allison, “The old Carl didn’t think he was enough for anybody. I thought if I said, ‘Yes’ to things and got involved with people, sooner or later they’d find out I’m not enough. Now I know what I have to share is pretty huge, and I want to share it with you.”

Such sharing means more than just talking about how our day went. Intimacy challenges us to share *who we are*—our fears, hopes, desires, and wounds. Such intimate sharing between spouses reverences the fact that you don’t have to be perfect. Marriage is the intimacy of two people, joined with God, sharing in the messiness, sinfulness, and brokenness of life, as well as the joys, faith, and healing of life.

Step Two: Listen to Your Beloved

The author of the letter of James reminds us, “Be quick to hear...” (James 1:19). Just as couples are called to communicate with one another, they are also called to listen to one another. I am convinced that listening is one of the greatest gifts that we can offer to other people. We live in a world right now where people are *starving* to have someone listen to them. We don’t have to look any further than Twitter and Facebook to see the support for my claim. When married couples begin to listen to one another—not just to one another’s words, but to the feelings, desires, hopes, and fears behind the words—then they begin to experience a new and deeper intimacy!

Step Three: Understand Sin as a Failed Attempt at Intimacy

In the book of Exodus, we read how the Israelite’s desired intimacy with God. When Moses was delayed in bringing them news of God’s love, they made their own god in the form of a golden calf, “Come, make us a god who will be our leader” (Exodus 32:1). This is what you and I do when we sin. I am convinced that the root of almost every sin is a failed attempt at intimacy. Once we realize that our sins are not horrible things that need to be ripped out of our lives, but rather, they are failed attempts at intimacy, we can let God use them to lead us into *authentic intimacy*. This is precisely what Stephanie experienced in her marriage.

Stephanie had been married to Phillip for fourteen years. Throughout those fourteen years, she struggled with alcoholism. She hated herself for not being able to give up her addiction. She constantly felt shame and despair. When she came to visit with me she and Phillip were on the verge of divorce. When I told her that her alcoholism was an invitation into intimacy, she thought I had lost it! Over the next few weeks, we explored how her struggle with the sin of alcoholism was a failed attempt at intimacy.

Stephanie had been sexually abused as a child. She began drinking as a teenager to “drown” her pervasive feelings of shame and self-hatred. Eventually, alcohol became a barrier that kept other people from getting too close to her. Without realizing it, she was using (abusing) alcohol in order to avoid intimacy since intimacy would mean other people seeing her shame and

hating her as much as she hated herself. Stephanie's alcoholism was an invitation into healing. In order to intimately love other people and be loved by others, she first needed to love herself; she needed to find her self-identity in God rather than in the abuse she had experienced.

Just as Stephanie's sin helped to point her toward the intimacy that God desired for her, our sins (especially our favorite sins) do the same. Understanding them as failed attempts at intimacy can lead us to wonderful healing.

This week, as we celebrate the Sacrament of Marriage, let's look for God's invitation into greater intimacy with Him and others. That invitation can come in many different forms, including a piece of chocolate.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ Slowly read through 1 Corinthians 13:1-8a. In what ways does this passage teach you about intimacy? Share with God your favorite sins and ask Him to help you see how those sins are failed attempts at intimacy.
- ✚ Married couples—One great way for married couples to experience the vulnerability and transparency of intimacy is by praying together naked (in private, of course, and not at Mass). In the intimacy of nakedness, take turns reading out loud the Gospel of John 15:9-17 and share with one another the words or phrases in these verses that spoke to you of intimacy.