

Intimacy as Covenant

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[0 : 00] I guess most clergy would say this, but I think we could probably all of us write a book about some of our experiences in pastoral visitation and all that kind of thing.

And I want to tell you about Marge, who was a very elderly lady in the first parish in which I served. And Marge, she had various antisocial habits which we don't need to go into.

But she did have a large dog called Bruno. She told me, and I felt sad when she told me this, she said, Bruno is my life.

And when I first started my job, my vicar, the guy who was supposed to train me, gave me a list of people, and I would take communion into their home.

You'll know about that, you know, if you're not well, somebody will bring communion to you. So I went around to see Marge, and the moment I got through the door, I could see Bruno was going to be an issue.

[1 : 08] He bared his teeth at me to begin with, and she said to him, it's okay, Bruno, he's a friend. He's a really intelligent dog. He understood every word she said.

So he temporarily withdrew, and I sat down, only to discover that Bruno fancied to sit down as well, and came and jumped on me and sat down on top of me.

And so regularly in Marge's home, I would lead the first part of Holy Communion with a dog sitting in my lap. It even got to the point where she said, would you mind bringing a spare wafer, because I think Bruno would like one.

I'm like, well, you know, I don't know about that. She said, well, you do think there'll be dogs in heaven, don't you? I'm like, as long as they don't make a mess, they can welcome you.

How would you describe that relationship? I don't think most of us would say Marge had an intimate relationship with the dog.

[2 : 10] I think you would say she had a dependent relationship. I think you might say that she had an affectionate relationship. But to call a relationship intimate is to take it into a different field, isn't it?

Partly because in English law, until relatively recently, to describe a relationship as intimate in a court of law would mean it would be a sexual relationship.

But the word intimate also has another sense to it, doesn't it? It means when we know something so well, it's like second nature to us.

We can anticipate. It was said of the chief engineer of the Saudia Williams Formula One racing team, no man had more intimate knowledge of Formula One engines than this man.

Intimacy is a kind of strange word for us because ultimately, we all crave intimacy, but many of us are scared of it.

[3 : 28] The thought that we might be known is something that's very scary to many of us. Somebody once said, when they were asked, what's the secret of your success?

I racked my brains this morning trying to remember who it was. What's the secret of success? They said, to not get found out. Well, that's kind of vaguely amusing, but it's also pretty sad, isn't it?

So, in Psalm 139, we learn a very foundational truth. And let me tell you, friend, you're in church this morning and you can appropriate this truth through your head into your heart.

It will completely recalibrate a lot of stuff in your life. It will change you. And I know in relationships, you know, for crying out loud, I've been married for 40-odd years.

You know, don't you, if you're a married person, don't put your arms up. But have you ever had this thought, if she changed, if he changed, things would be a lot different around here. The only thing is, there's only one change you can take responsibility for, and that's you.

[4 : 49] And what's going on in your soul, and what's going on in your life. Listen to these words. Deb read them too. I don't know, you know, every time I read these, this psalm was nicknamed the Hound of Heaven.

Starts off with these words. Oh Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know me when I sit and when I rise. You perceive my thoughts from afar.

This is a God who at one level is awesome and is the sovereign Lord of the universe and the earth, the heavens, all that therein is.

Believe it or not, he's even sovereign no matter what happens with Brexit. Doesn't mean we shouldn't be attentive to what's going on. But whatever we decide about Brexit won't let the Lord of the throne of heaven.

Is that right? But this Lord who is so awesome is the same Lord who knows you intimately.

[6 : 04] You ever thought about this? What it says in the Bible is not my idea, right? It says, before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely.

I tell you, in the past, there have been some words on my tongue I didn't even know God knew those words. That's how intimately you are known.

I'm always struck when I read in the epistle to the Ephesians, you know that amazing verse, Ephesians 2 verse 10 I think it is, where it says, you are God's workmanship.

You might be at a stage in your life where you look in a mirror these days and you think, well, you could have done a better job there. But that's not what God sees. What God sees when he looks at you.

However hurt you feel, however aching you feel, however messed up you feel, however hidden you feel, he sees what you could be.

[7 : 10] And when he sees that, it gives him real pleasure. And the only sadness in all that is when we resist becoming what we could be because, well, that's just me.

That's just us. you remember in the book of Genesis, there was this amazing narrative about, you know, God makes the world and then there's this beautiful garden.

And the man and the woman are told, you both can do whatever you like in this garden. There's just one thing. just one thing that you can't do.

And that is, you must not go and pluck the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You remember that bit? And then this blooming snake shows up who has really good, you know, speaking.

This is a snake that can talk. And he tempts Eve and she goes and picks the apple, takes a bite of it. You know one of the first things the Bible says happened after that?

[8 : 31] It says in verse 8 of chapter 3, do you not believe me? Go look this up. It says, they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden.

Immediately after she'd taken a bite of that fruit, they hid. And friends, human beings, maybe you and me, spend our lifetimes hiding.

Because we're frightened that if somebody had intimate knowledge of us, they might reject us. success is not being found out, then basically what we're saying is our lives are a lie.

We're just pretending. And do you know that word pretending? It comes up in the New Testament a fair bit. Remember when Jesus started to speak to the fantastically committed religious people of the time, the Pharisees.

I mean, we have them written off as the kind of New Testament baddies. But actually, they were serious about their faith. They prayed five times a day.

[9 : 54] Put your hand up if you pray five times and don't do it really. I'm just making a point. Right? They gave 10% of their money. The treasure is getting aroused at this point.

And then they gave on top of that 10% free will offerings. These were people who were the respectable religious people of the moment and Jesus tore into them.

Called them hypocrites. That's a word borrowed from the world of Greek theater. Do you remember the world of Greek theater? Everybody wears a mask.

To hide their true identity. Lord, you've searched me and you know me. And the amazing thing about covenant grace is that though you've searched me and you know me, you still love me.

And you still want to reside in me. And you still want to change my life and you want to liberate me to be the person that I could be. Imagine.

[11:14] I wonder how many of you have relationships that you would like to go further but somehow they get kind of stuck. It's not that anything's bad about the relationship, it's just that you feel this relationship could be more.

I sense that. If a lot of people in marriages think about that, they think, you know what, this, this, do you have this, I have this sometimes, you know, I feel I know my wife inside out.

And then some days, she'll just say stuff to me, I'm like, where did that come from? Why would anyone think that? And the problem with that is, as I said, many of us, if we feel we're in a relationship that's kind of peaked early, we kind of think the responsibility for the last yards of it are the other person I'm in relationship with.

Listen, here's a very seminal universal truth that could free you today. That if you could truly believe that God knows you intimately, and yet he still loves you, you could be released to start to understand intimacy in your horizontal relationships with your relationships here on earth in a new way.

For if the God of the heavens and the earth and universe and all that there is, could look at me and know me and still love me, wouldn't that be something?

[13:10] it's not my thoughts, this is what scripture reveals to us about the God we worship today. So I want to speak a word of you to those who feel you might be a bit stuck in a relationship.

We'd like it to go more, listen to me. Improvement in any of your relationships is virtually entirely down to you. you can spend your life wishing the person that you want to be friends with, you want to be married to, would be a different kind of person, but in the end, it will be your behavior that changes them, not your moaning at them that changes them.

I know that nagging feels like a good blood sport, but it doesn't change the world, does it? what could I show of myself in the friendships that I have?

I'm always amazed when I go to places and preach. I was speaking to a bunch of men in, is there a place called Froome?

Froome? Yeah, somewhere in England. and I talked to these men and I was talking about, you know, how the Lord had, you know, taken a total moron and sort of changed his life around.

[14:47] And at the end of it, there's a guy in the audience who's a bishop. And he was a bishop in Kenya, though he's a white guy, he was a bishop in Kenya, he sticks his hand up, says, may I ask a question?

I'm like, well, I think you're going to anyway, but, you know. He says, how would you say the way your father treated you influenced the way you cared for the clergy?

I'm like, wow, you know, that's a googly and a bouncer, all in one delivery. So I said, well, I'm sure it must have in some ways.

I'm sure it must have. But listen, there's one of my former clergy sitting there. Why don't you, no, you stand up, no, tell him how you think I behaved partially towards the clergy.

And the phone went. No problem, I've done it myself. where was I?

[16:02] I was, and so this guy says, well, my, you know, it's a mixed bag, actually, what he said. He said, you have great communication skills, anybody, you know, people love listening to you, blah, blah, blah.

He said, but probably pastoral stuff is not your strength. Where's this going? He said, but fortunately, your colleague, the Bishop of Swindon, was brilliant pastoral, so you made a great team together, and, and, and, I thought, oh, well, you know, I have to hear that.

You know, I felt it was from the Holy Spirit to hear that. You know, I have to say that even though my regular visits to March provided me enough information to write a book.

I am not the kind of person who finds it that easy to listen to the same person tell me the same story of their hip replacement over and over again, and still look interested, right?

I tell you, I could do a hip replacement. Here's my point. At the end of that meeting, these guys were coming up to me saying, whoa, what did you do?

[17:24] I said, what do you mean? They said, you let that guy talk about you in a pub, he could have hung you out to dry. Somebody pretty well did, as a matter of fact.

They said, we can't believe anybody would be that honest. So, you know, my thought was, so it would be better if I lied.

Well, some of you have taken that option in your life. You have decided it'd be better to tell lies about who you are than be the person you are because you're scared.

Actually, if people knew what you were really like, oh my goodness, they would reject you. And you need to hear this message very clearly, very loudly, in a way that goes through your head and into your heart.

If the God of the heavens and the earth and all that therein is, knows you better than you even know yourself, knows what you're going to say before you even say it, and still loves you, there's got to be hope.

[18 : 34] Hope for me and hope for you. So to the people who are stuck in relationships, just think about this.

Maybe at the end of the service, I'm sure there's a prayer team hanging around somewhere, they're always lurking somewhere, aren't they? They're there, they're going to get you sometime. Where will they be?

They'll be by the giving bowl. you need to go get that sorted out.

The second thing is, this is really tricky. A lot of us, sometimes, I mean mostly through our experiences of life, are never really sure whether anybody really loves us.

What's that lingering doubt, you know? And some of us involve ourselves in neurotic behavior. behavior. And it goes like this, I am a very rejectable person.

[19 : 40] I'm in a relationship with you, so I will act out behaviors that test whether you really love me, till I overdo it to the point where you chuck me out, and then I say I was right all along, I'm rejectable.

It's very tiring for both parties to a relationship in that kind of context. some of us need to hear again, I'm not trying to feminize the gospel or anything like that, we need to hear again that this God loves you more than you can ever imagine, that this God sent his son onto the cross of Calvary, so that the bits of you that you don't like, the bits of you that you want to hide, that's the straight old hymn that we sang earlier said, it gets nailed to the cross, it's done, Jesus said from the cross, consummatum et, sorry he didn't speak Latin, it is finished, it's done, you can stop hiding, you can come out from the bush, you can know that this

God loves you, and the evidence for that is the cross, a piece of history, even the most ardent atheist would not seek to try and disprove that the cross of Calvary was a place where Jesus Christ was crucified, they might dispute who he is, but the historical fact is solid, bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned, he stood, seal my pardon with his blood, hallelujah, what a savior.

I think if you're the person who is so insecure that you have to keep testing out your relationships, then you need to go get help as well. intimacy in the hands of God means that you are known, you are known better than you know yourself and that God who knows you loves you, and he offers you the invitation to become the person that you could be, you could be, by submitting to him.

You know, there was a, I used, I was once a movie star, appreciate that, right, which technically means I was an extra in a movie called General Pattern, Blood and Guts.

[23 : 01] I took place in my hometown of Knutsford in Cheshire, and all the letters, we were given these long shorts to wear and boots like kids did in the Second World War allegedly, and I didn't even get a mention at the Oscars.

But one of the things, so when I got into kind of teenage years, I got interested in General Pattern, who was a very, I suppose you would say he was a very aggressive military leader, and one of his jobs was to come up through Italy towards the end of the Second World War, driving out enclaves of Nazis and their collaborators, and they tell the story of the day when he got on the back of his tank, put his berry on and addressed the men who'd been fighting for weeks.

They were tired, they were smelly, they were hungry, they were just not in the mood, and he did his big speech thing, he said, men, some of you today will lose your lives, some of you will lose your guts, many of you will lose your friends.

He said, but we need to take that hill up there, and I can't march with you if you're half committed. So would you put your hands up if you're willing to march, and one by one these grubby men put their hands in the air and the army marched, and the hill was taken.

Let me ask you something. Do you think General Patton could have taken a hill with a half-committed army? you know, would you think if I just said, yeah, okay, how many of us realistically say, yeah, okay, to God?

[24 : 58] This course of messages that you'll be hearing over the next few weeks, not from me, someone say, thank God. It's about growing commitment, deepening commitment.

that's what God is looking for in you and for you. And friends, finally, just a footnote. The footnote is this, that if, as many, many churches do, their mission statement is, you know, to know the love of God and share it with those around us, yada, yada, yada. What kind of church do we need to be to be the kind of church that makes people come who feel they may have a lot to hide, come out into the open and know God in a new way? I was really encouraged about our church recently. I was talking to a young couple who were here. They'd only come because their parents were Christians and they kind of dragged them along on a Sunday morning.

[26 : 14] And, you know, it's likely to be a one-off because I don't think they had any commitment to coming back. They just had a commitment to kind of keep in with their mom and dad. So I said to them, she explained their situation, I said, do you come here often?

They said, no, we've just been out. And then this woman said to me, this is the friendliest church I have ever been in. And my heart skipped a beat.

And oftentimes when I was in local church ministry, when our church, every church thinks they're friendly. You know, I've taken hundreds of church weekends, you know. So what do you, the people of St.

Grottis, think your main show, oh, we're very friendly? I said, so do you get a lot of people who come once? They said, yeah, we do, yeah. Quite a lot of footfall past our church, yeah, we go. I said, why don't you go and talk to them? Find out how friendly you really are. Listen, the warmth of God's love, if it's genuine, will bring people out of hiding.

[27 : 31] And the glorious liberation of the gospel is that we could become the people that God wants us to be. Come on, we can do this.

We can do it together. What it needs is a move from you. Stop hiding. Stop doubting God's love for you.

Stop just talking to your friends in church. Go look at some people you never seen before. and be friendly to you. By the way, if there's anybody here for the first time today, I apologize if you get absolutely consumed at the end of the service.

It's well-meant. Oh, Lord, you've searched me, and you know me.

God, I find it hard to believe that the God of the heavens and the earth and all that there is could know me and still love me.

[28 : 38] And he knows you and he still loves you. And he invites you out from behind your bush, from behind the tree, so that he can do his work in you.

Your life will be transformed, your relationships will be transformed, and you start to edge towards becoming the people that God wants you to be.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.