

Defining Intimacies

#2 of 43 (John 12:1-11)

There was more to it. There always is.

When I began in youth ministry, on the weekends during my junior year of college, leading kids was “a piece of cake.” Being single and having no children of my own, I understood *all* the complexities of parenting and had the appropriate answer for every possible scenario. Seriously. How arduous could childrearing be? My parents had *no* trouble with me. (Yeah. Uh huh.) My naivety must have been apparent but I was walking around with blinders. My youth ministry efforts spanned twelve years and two churches before entering the preaching ministry.

Within five years of that significant career transition, Susie and I had two daughters, Kaitlyn Hope and Emily Victoria. Having our own children during those final years in youth ministry revealed one certainty—I didn’t know much about kids. Turns out, there was more to leading youth than showing up weekly for three hours on Sunday and two hours on Wednesday night. The enterprise of family ministry required more than appearing at a football game, hosting an all night lock-in, or planning a survival camping trip for a long weekend.

Here are three truthful facts. 1) While in youth ministry, I didn’t fully appreciate or understand it—not to the depth needed nor to the degree of my bravado. 2) My college youth ministry minor was achieved by the successful completion of one class—Christian Camping. 3) Being a parent taught me more about youth ministry than my formal education.

I look back on those early years and wonder, “How much did I understand?” My concise conclusion is this: very little. Intimacy is like *that*. Just when you think you know what you understand, you realize what you understand is not what you thought you understood!

As previously mentioned, use the word “intimacy” and many people, if not most, think along the lines of sexuality. (I just tested this on our 22 year old daughter, Emily. I said, “I’m going to mention a word. Tell me the first thing that comes to your mind.” Her response after I said the word “intimacy”? “Sex.” I told her she just proved her daddy right, again—good girl!) This culturally driven mindset doesn’t begin to scratch the surface of the deeper intimacies which exist. We need a rebranding, for the world around us grows shallow even while technology and life sciences deepen.

Have there been areas in life in which you thought you were an expert but it turned out you weren’t? Maybe you thought you could handle the car repair. Events turned out badly! You were unable to drive your car to the dealer to fix your “fixes.” You had to call a wrecker service and have your car towed. It cost you twice as much.

Maybe you figured you could handle the house repair. How hard could replacing a cold water valve really be? What a spectacle! You forgot to turn off the water. Surprise! You didn’t realize you’d be replacing your flooring from water damage when you first grabbed your tools, did you?

Maybe you experienced this at work. Remember when you spoke boldly at the meeting? You jumped off that lift before listening to the language everyone was using. Whoops! Your “communicative skis” got away from you and were quickly beyond your sphere of knowledge. Crash! That was more than a little embarrassing, huh?

Maybe it happened at school. Remember when you volunteered to tutor your fellow student? Turned out, he knew more than you. Uncomfortable! You may have missed your calling as a champion swimmer with the back-stroke you demonstrated.

This is the ongoing life of many when it comes to intimacy. If we’re among the crowd who

thinks “sexual relations” when the word “intimacy” is used, our understanding is need of rehabilitation. We must determine to stop being a by-product of our society and become better acquainted with defining intimacies.

Although disagreement abounds on how many exist, it’s indisputable that there are various aspects of intimacy. Research reveals four, five, six, or more specific intimacy areas. The common are: physical (including but not limited to sexual intimacy), spiritual, emotional, and mental. (Some separate/combine emotional and mental intimacy.) Among others are: financial, social, intellectual, and experiential intimacy. The subject is indeed, and rightfully so, vast.

For our purposes of intimate living with God (and others), we will focus on five main areas: emotional, physical, mental, experiential, and spiritual. These are broad enough to encompass other aspects of intimacy. The skills implemented will intermingle into other intimacies.

Before moving on, let’s review our “intimacy” definition we shared last week.

INTIMACY:

The harmonization of attitudes and actions resulting from mutual effort to see and be seen,
know and be known, and connect at significant personal depth;
a unifying of separate individuals in oneness.

Having a firm grasp on defining “intimacy,” let’s provide an overview, and at least one example from John 12:1-11, of our five defining intimacies.

First, emotional intimacy comes from the harmonization of innermost thoughts, vulnerabilities, feelings, or impressions (conscious or subconscious).

John 12:1-2:

Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at [the] table.

Jesus’ last Passover was upon Him. It would be marked by His personal sacrifice as the true and final Passover Lamb. This was a time filled with emotion as millions of pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem in obedience to God’s command for the great feast. The celebration commemorated God’s deliverance of Israel out of Egypt with specific implication to salvation from the death angel who “passed over” homes with blood on the doorposts (Exodus 12). There had been nine previous plagues and Egypt’s ruler hadn’t released God’s people from slavery. This tenth plague, the death of the firstborn, could only be averted by following God’s guidelines. With all Egyptian homes struck with grief from the death of their firstborns, the pharaoh relented and the exodus began. People of a nation often share unifying remembrances of an event, even without personally living through it (i.e. those born after Pearl Harbor or September 11, 2001). The Passover was a highlight for all of Israel, even centuries later.

Beyond the historically significant celebration, we’re told of forged friendships. These relational connections produced sincere gratitude which was expressed through the offering of a meal among friends and associates. The meal is offered at Simon the Leper’s house (Matthew 26). He had, most likely, previously been healed by Jesus. Lazarus, who had been raised from the dead, was also present.

There are ample emotional intimacy avenues in these opening verses. Can you not sense the energy, thoughts, feelings, and impressions?

Second, physical intimacy comes from the harmonization resulting from presence or shared affection. Affection can range widely, from a simple touch to sexual relations.

John 12:3:

Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

At the dinner, Mary anointed Jesus' head (Matthew 26:7) and feet, wiping the overflow of perfume with her hair. Against all social norms and acceptable traditions, Mary let down her hair in public (something a Jewish woman reserved only for private moments with her husband). She used her hair, the crown of her glory (1 Corinthians 11:15), on Jesus' feet. This, non-sexual act, is deeply intimate and personal. As is often the case, physical intimacy can reveal the presence of other intimacies. She was unconcerned about what others thought. Through a physically intimate act, Mary confessed Jesus as her salvation and hope, selflessly revealing her heart's worship and gratitude.

Third, mental intimacy comes from the harmonization of ideas, philosophies, or mutual concerns.

John 12:4-8:

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" ⁶ He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

In this passage, we have the absence and presence of mental intimacy. Judas Iscariot (and the other disciples) displays clearly for us the absence of mental intimacy with Jesus. Judas didn't share Jesus' ideas, demonstrating concern only for himself by lining his pockets with stolen money. He shared no genuine concern for the poor or Jesus' work. Judas was solely about himself. His indignant words towards Mary's gift carried an insinuation towards the Master. From Judas' vantage point, Jesus was allowing lavish and inappropriate actions to be given to Him while the poor were being ignored. Judas may have been the instigator of these thoughts, but the other disciples missed the mental intimacy boat by participating in the condemnation of Mary's action and Jesus' inaction (Matthew 26:8-9).

Mary, however, demonstrates mental intimacy with the Messiah. She had been paying attention. When Jesus said He must die, she believed Him. The disciples hadn't been listening and rejected the thought. Their view of the Messiah conflicted with Jesus' message, but Mary understood. Her gift reflects timely awareness of Jesus' upcoming death. She showed a clear understanding of events fast approaching Jesus while the disciples revealed their cluelessness. Seeing the intensifying hostilities the religious leaders had towards Jesus, Mary moved her gift forward in time, possibly being fearful the Pharisees would stop her from performing this anointing honor to Him upon His death.

Fourth, experiential intimacy comes from the harmonization of shared activities or experiences. These are endless—walking on the beach, bike riding, watching a movie, fighting on the same battlefield, reading the same book, sharing a meal, etc.

John 12:9-11:

When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹ because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

Let me bring two experiential intimacies to light among so many within these three verses.

The first one, Lazarus has already experienced and Jesus would experience it very soon. The other, Jesus has already experienced it and now Lazarus would.

The first experiential intimacy is that Lazarus has been raised from the dead. This connects Lazarus to the One who raised him in a very intimate way. Jesus is a week away from sharing this same experience. He, too, would be raised from the dead but with one major difference—He would never die again! A resurrection from the dead deeply bonds all who share that experience. When the children of God are raised to eternal life that bond will be incredibly shared for eternity among all brothers and sisters in Christ.

Jesus was the first among the two men to experience the second experiential intimacy. For some time, the religious leaders had been trying to devise a way to assassinate Jesus. Now, the Pharisees add Lazarus to their liquidation list. He was irrefutable evidence that Jesus was the Messiah, the resurrection and the life. Fearing a loss of power and control over the people, the Pharisees would do whatever was necessary to stop the people from placing their trust in Jesus. Although one is usually sufficient for most men, the temple leaders committed themselves to treat Lazarus to another death to maintain their positions of authority. Persecution can fuel experiential intimacy.

Finally, fifth, spiritual intimacy comes from the harmonization of God-centered, awe-inspiring moments. These “spiritual pivot points” vary widely and can incorporate (but aren’t limited to) the spiritual disciplines of worship, fasting, Bible study, prayer, devotions, etc.

There are so many examples of spiritual intimacy in John 12:1-11. Martha. Mary. Lazarus. Simon the Leper. Judas. The disciples. The people. The religious leaders. All of these have a spiritual story to divulge. We could use any one of them to illustrate spiritual intimacy. Some would testify to a deep spiritual connection with Jesus. Others, would not.

Martha will serve as our example. Think about the conversations Martha had with Jesus. 1) Previously, Martha complained she was doing all the work while her sister, Mary, was listening to Jesus (Luke 10:38-42). Jesus told Martha that her sister had made the better choice and it wouldn’t be taken away from her. 2) Martha sent word to Jesus that her brother, Lazarus, was sick (John 11:3-7). Despite caring for Lazarus and his family, Jesus delayed two days before traveling to Bethany. Lazarus died. Jesus arrived four days after his death. 3) Martha went out to meet Jesus upon His arrival (John 11:20-27). She stated, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.” She stated clearly that God would do whatever Jesus asked. Jesus proclaimed to be the resurrection and the life. Martha confirmed her belief that Jesus was the Messiah. 4) Martha reacted to Jesus’ instruction for the stone sealing Lazarus’ grave to be removed (John 11:38-40). Fearful of the embarrassing odor from her brother being in the grave four days, Martha was confronted to put her faith in action and believe. All these conversations drip with spiritual intimacy and disclose a heart that’s growing along the journey of intimacy with Jesus and in understanding of His mission!

Of all the defining intimacies, spiritual intimacy, by far, is the deepest, greatest, and strongest. Spiritual intimacy should be our most desired intimacy pursuit.

So, what do we do with this message? How do we implement a message like this into our lives? What faith step can we take today as we continue our intimacy journey?

Think about your life, your relationship with God (and others) through the lens of these five defining intimacies. Spend a little time today, or this week, pondering them, thinking through your own experiences.

Ask yourself: “How have I experienced spiritual, physical, mental, emotional, and experiential intimacy with God?” “How has God used these defining intimacies to grow my faith?” “In what way have I experienced intimacy with God through these avenues?”

After you've spent time reflecting on your relationship with God, go back and contemplate your other relationships. Ask yourself: "Who are the people I share these intimacies with?" "Why these individuals and not others?" "What has happened that has brought these intimacies into fruition?"

What could happen if we deepened our intimacy with God? What can be learned through the process? The specific details of our personal testimony would be different than Martha, Mary, Lazarus, Simon the Leper, or any of the disciples, but the same truth applies to each of us. Whether we've lived in the first, twenty-first, or any other century, Jesus has desired an intimate relationship with each of us. It's that intimate relationship that has the power to bring others, who are searching, even thirsting, for such a relationship with God, an opportunity to see what it looks like, how it starts, and how it's grown.

What could happen if we deepened one relationship in our lives and then another and then another? How would our children be impacted if we as mothers and fathers would become more spiritually intimate with each other? How would that bring about a legacy affecting future generations? How would the world around us be changed if we showed the way of doing intimate relationships correctly?

For most us, it's time to take that step by understanding how these five defining intimacies have impacted our relationship with God (and others).