

PRAY God, you are beyond our knowing but we seek you. You are beyond our touch yet we see your love unfolding in every leaf, flower, bird, and child. You become one of us in Jesus. Help us grow toward unity in you. Amen

4th Sunday of Easter



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SPIRIT

By Bob Bartlett

Sometimes teens wonder if they are into healthy or unhealthy patterns of intimacy. It is difficult to offer any meaningful insights to this question without knowing more about their personal situations, but four questions are always worth thinking about.

First, is the relationship fun? Second, is the relationship exclusive? Third, are we comfortable with silence? Fourth, am I dating an equal?

is supposed to be fun. I don't mean that every moment is hilarious. Sometimes couples need to do some serious talking, but generally dating should be fun. It should not be pressure. Relationships have no set patterns and timetables. In a healthy relationship, there is no point A, B, C, or K to get to. Two people enjoy being with each other. If one person in the relationship is not comfortable doing something, the other respects that. In a healthy relationship, one or both of the people involved can say no and the other person will respect that

simply because the relationship is too important to risk hurting. In a healthy relationship people enjoy being with each other and don't pressure each other.

Most of us have observed couples who fight constantly. He puts her down behind her back; she puts him down behind his back, and friends wonder why they continue to go out. The fun in the relationship has passed. Their relationship exists like a bad habit, or they are hanging on to each other until someone else comes along.

Relationships should not be exclusive. When I observe couples cutting off family and friends, when they stop doing things they used to love doing, I get nervous that the relationship is becoming unhealthy. It can appear very romantic when he announces he is not trying out for the basketball team senior year, so he can spend more time with her. Often this is more foolish than romantic.

If we sincerely love someone, we want them to be happy. We do not want to take from them the very things they enjoy doing. All relationships need time for people to be alone, but when this becomes the norm, it can be a danger sign.



Dating

An Excerpt from

GROWING TOWARD INTIMACY



In my experience, exclusivity is an indicator that sex is becoming a preoccupation in the relationship. This can become a trap for the couple. When sex becomes the focus of the relationship, it isolates the couple from the very people and things they enjoy.

A person who really loves me does not ask me to give up friends I really care about. No one person, no matter how great she or he is, can take care of all my needs. Authentic love includes, invites, is open to life and people. It does not desire to exclude or cut off the other people whom we share life with.

Once I was presenting a workshop on sexuality to a group of high school students.

I was discussing the concept of integrated patterns of sexuality, when a junior from Chicago asked if he could comment on something I presented.

"I don't go on dates any more without talking first," he said. "I tell the girl what my limits are physically and why. I lay out my boundaries. If she can't respect those, then the date is over. If we start pushing beyond the boundaries, we call a time-out and have a good talk. The reason is that I loved this one girl more than any other. I got her pregnant and

her parents never let me see her again. It still hurts, and I will not let that happen again."

I was amazed. I affirmed him for this and said that I had never heard of teens setting boundaries like that. Out of the 100 kids in the workshop at least 20 more talked about setting boundaries. This is a sign of healthy intimacy.

A third indicator, not proof, of healthy intimacy is that the couple is comfortable with silence. Silence can be a sign that the couple can't talk and the relationship is in jeopardy, but usually being silent together comes from a high level of comfort and trust. Couples who are intimate in healthy ways can sometimes silently study together or sit closely for 15 minutes or more and feel very comfortable.

Fun, openness to others, and comfort with silence all indicate health in close, developing friendships. Basically, healthy patterns of intimacy show in the ability to be a friend.

Those young people who have several healthy, intimate friendships but never seem to date should hang in there. Sometimes we feel as if all the jerks get dates. I had an annual

date in high school. I was probably the Confirmation service project for some of them. At times this can be funny; it can also be painful.

However, compromising one's self to get dates is not worth it. Some women hide their intelligence, their assertiveness, their humor so that they won't intimidate the guy. Some men will act like someone else, trying to be tough, funny, or intelligent, thinking the women will like them more. This is a natural tendency, but crazy. No date is worth the price of not being one's self. Good friendships with males/females are more life-giving than these kind of dates.

One high school senior came in to talk, feeling depressed because she had no dates. It was painful to listen to her wondering what was wrong with her and second-guessing her personal worth because she had so much going for her. I could honestly look at her and say she probably scared some guys off because she was her own person. She was honest, fun, and deep.

These very traits probably kept some guys away short term, but long term these traits will serve her well. I hoped she could understand that though she had fewer dates, at least those she had would be real. She

SOCIETY TEACHES WOMEN AND GIRLS THAT THEIR SELF WORTH DEPENDS ON HOW THEY LOOK. For instance, women earn more than men in only two job categories modeling and prostitution. (www.about-face.org quoted from Wolf, The Beauty Myth) **SELF IMAGE PROBLEMS AFFECT BOYS TOO.** One million have eating disorders. National Institute on Drug Abuse estimates that 500,000 young people take steroids. **SIX OUT OF TEN SCHOOL GIRLS WITH EATING DISORDERS OR RELATED SYMPTOMS DON'T BELIEVE THEY NEED HELP.** (Ohio State University)

SUNDAY GOSPEL

3rd Sunday of Easter

Jesus lays down his life for his friends.

JESUS 1: I am the good shepherd.

Good shepherds lay down their lives for the sheep. Hired hands, who are not really shepherds and to whom the sheep do not belong, catch sight of a wolf coming, forsake the sheep, and run away; then the wolf can snatch and scatter the sheep.

ALL: Hired hands run off because they work for pay and don't care about the sheep.

JESUS 2: I am the good shepherd.

I know my sheep, and mine know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I lay down my life for the sheep.

JESUS 3: I have other sheep not of this fold. I must lead them, too, and they shall hear my voice.

There will be one flock and one shepherd.

JESUS 4: The Father loves me for this: that I lay down my life to take it up again. No one takes it from me; I lay it down freely. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.

John 10.11-18



could act phony, play games, and probably secure a few more dates, but were they worth the price? She answered no. But she needed support and reminding that the male/female friendships she had were of very high quality. She had great friendships.

Dating an equal is a fourth indicator of healthy, integrated intimacy. Once in Colorado while giving a talk on intimacy to a group of Air Force chaplains, one of them asked, "I have this 22-year-old friend who recently found Jesus. He constantly has his Bible with him, wears huge crucifixes, and will preach to anyone who will listen and some who won't. He started dating this 17-year-old, high school student. They got pregnant. He felt terrible. It was against everything he believed. She wanted to get married, but he feared it was just because of

the pregnancy and he convinced her not to. He also talked her out of an abortion, supported her through the entire pregnancy, the delivery, and the adoption. My question is, why after going through all of this, would he now start dating a 16 year old?"

I do not know this person's friend. I only know what he told me. I did suggest that he ask the man if he was afraid of intimacy. By dating women younger than himself, he has control over how close they can get to him. Most younger women at this age cannot challenge him on the same intellectual or emotional level that women closer to his own age can. Thus he is safe. He doesn't have to let anyone in. He can avoid real intimacy. I wonder if he fears a woman who can stand toe to toe with him, who is capable of challenging him emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, or mentally.

Choosing to date someone who will be dependent and safe happens with more frequency than we think. I hear teens talk about women and men they go out with who are "so stupid" or "will never get it." Some guys will brag about the "bimbos" they date, and some girls about these "clueless" guys they go out with.

QUESTIONS

- 1 How many close friendships can one person have?
- 2 What makes dating fun in your experience?
- 3 What's unhealthy about exclusive relationships?
- 4 What indicates you are dating an equal?
- 5 What relationship does a good shepherd have with the sheep?
- 6 What kind of friend lays down his life for us?

When I hear these remarks, I tend to think less of them than the people they are ridiculing. I want to challenge them, and sometimes do, by questioning them about what they are avoiding. I want them to reflect on why they choose to date people they can control. Are they afraid someone might get in? Are they fearful of the vulnerability that real intimacy requires?

Real intimacy is not easy. It requires ongoing energy and effort. Avoiding intimacy is an easy pattern to develop early in life and one we can transfer into our adult relationships.

Our Faith Calls Us to Mutual Love

Treating one another as equals is the principle on which we build communities and societies in our world. The U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights insure that men and women and people of every color have the right to vote and the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

From the beginning Jesus challenges Christians to live in mutual love, despite differences between Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, men and women. Sunday's gospel insists that in the Christian community those who serve the rest are the greatest.



Serving one another in mutual love and treating one another as equals aren't easy. In the first community in Jerusalem Christians shared their wealth by putting their money in a common pot. The community then provided for everyone. But when some Jewish Christians overlooked or refused to provide food for Greek-speaking widows, conflict arose. The community appointed deacons to make sure everyone received food. The title *deacon* means server in Greek (Acts 6.1-6).

The verb *serve* describes the work slaves and women usually did—wash clothes, cook, wait tables, feed animals, wash feet. A master or husband can order a slave or wife to perform such duties. In this sense to serve means to submit, to obey.

Jesus challenges his followers to build a community that reverses the usual pecking order in Roman families, in which the father was head and then in rank, the wife, children, males slaves, female slaves. The members of Jesus' community call no one father. "Only one is your father, the One in heaven." The community has only one teacher—the messiah.

Early Christians formed communities of equals and challenged one another to love as Jesus loved them, not as a household in which some submitted to the authority of others. Instead they called one another brother and sisters, terms of equal rank. In serving one another they lived out Jesus' challenge to mutual love.

The baptismal formula that Paul includes in a letter to the Galatians describes the Christian community as being one in Christ. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3.28).

Most Christians live out Jesus' challenge in the sacrament of marriage. The Catechism of the Catholic Church understands marriage as a sacrament of service. A husband and wife love each other mutually. Each partner seeks his or her well-being in the other. The health of their children rests on the well-being of their relationship, so ultimately does the well-being of society.

Practicing equality and mutual love takes work and ongoing personal change. Every teen whose skin is some shade of



Respect for the human person considers the other another self.

Catechism of the Catholic Church #1944

color will have experienced prejudice. White teens have little awareness their skin color gives them privileges. Chess players may get less respect than athletes in school.

Many young people need support—friends whose parents are divorcing, classmates with poor self image, those learning to speak English or fit into American culture. To follow Jesus is to follow a leader with no wealth or position, who identifies with the least among us and serves the rest.

FAITH in ACTION

- 1 Who that you know is great because he or she serves?
- 2 What inequalities do you experience in your student body at school? How might your class or group research the reasons for the inequities and work to right them?
- 3 How should friends treat friends in mutual love?
- 4 How should boy- and girlfriends treat each other in dating relationships?
- 5 What is a way you serve in your neighborhood, parish, or school today?
- 6 What is a way you want to serve after high school?