

Hungering for Relationship

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Two Women at a Window" by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo

Prayer of Illumination

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit,
that in your light we may see light,
in your truth find freedom,
and in your will discover your peace,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 4:7-12 (NLT)

⁷ I observed yet another example of something meaningless under the sun. ⁸ This is the case of a man who is all alone, without a child or a brother, yet who works hard to gain as much wealth as he can. But then he asks himself, "Who am I working for? Why am I giving up so much pleasure now?" It is all so meaningless and depressing.

⁹ Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. ¹⁰ If one person falls, the other can reach out and help.

But someone who falls alone is in real trouble. ¹¹ Likewise, two people lying close together can keep each other warm. But how can one be warm alone? ¹² A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Hungering for Relationship

In Leo Tolstoy's riveting short story *Master and Man*, the wealthy master Vasili thinks only of two things: himself and money. And he would *do* just about anything and *use* just about anyone to amass more money. Wherever Vasili goes, he ever remains in "that small country of selfishness."

Most of the story is a painful account of the master's stubborn plans to travel by night through a blizzard to make a business deal. He drags the poor peasant Nikita and his horse along the ill-fated journey. Over and over the snowblind Vasili fails to heed the mounting warning signs all around to halt the doomed journey and try again in the morning. He just doesn't stop driving... until his luck runs out.

In one last selfish and pathetic attempt to save his skin, the master abandons the peasant Nikita who was buried in a snowdrift. But the "whitey darkness" of the snow disorients the master and brings him back to the horse and the man. There's no escape. The master is forced to come to terms with the undeniable—it's over. He's mortal, just like everybody else. He should have listened to the signs. He prays. Then a soft cry is heard from the snowdrift. It was the man Nikita. He was alive—barely. Vasili stood motionless for half a minute. And the most unlikely of things happens—transformation. No speech is given by the master. A lightbulb doesn't go off. You don't hear a choir of angels singing. Instead, Vasili acts. There's a shift in his energy. Before he poured everything into himself or money. Now he redirected his energy into saving a life.

Vasili turned up his sleeves, raked the snow off the man, and placed him down in the earth. He covered the peasant with not only his nice fur coat, but with the whole of his body which glowed with warmth. He could only hear the man's breathing. They were face to face. 'Lie still and get warm Nikita, that's our way.' To Vasili's great surprise, tears began to form in his eyes. His jaw began to quiver. This weakness gave him a peculiar joy such as he never felt before. "That's our way!" Feeling a strange and solemn tenderness, Vasili no longer thought of merely himself, but how to keep a fellow man warm. As the master lay dying, a new man was born in him. He remembered his money, his shop, his house, the buying and the selling, and it was hard for him to understand why that man, Vasili, had troubled himself with all those things with which he had been troubled. Then he did not know what the real thing was. Now he knew what it was.... It was relationship. Caring for his fellow man, the master became a man, now human and humane.

"The being of God," notes Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, "is a relational being: without the concept of communion it would not be possible to speak of God." Communion is union with another—fellowship or mutual love. Created in the Triune God's image, we too are relational beings.

Psychologist Todd Hall puts it this way in his book *Relational Spirituality*:

"Since every person is made in the image of God, every person reflects God's goodness and is thus the proper object of love. No one, then, is outside the scope of our call to love."

Our spiritual life is a sharing in or participation in the love between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. By God's grace we can extend this limitless love back to God and to those around us.

We need relationships just about as much as we need oxygen, water, and food. The absence of close relationships impacts our physical health more than smoking or a poor diet. Our most important belongings are not things, but people. How we treat all these relationships matters. A lot.

We've all been hard-wired for human connection—with family, friends, those we look up to, those we serve: Relationships help us cope with stress, enjoy mental well-being, experience personal meaning, and grow spiritually. We need to not just receive this love from others, but to give love, too. To love and be loved.

If we think we can only give love, and have nothing to receive—trouble is around the corner. If we're only taking, never giving—unhealth is not far behind. There's a to and fro, give and take in relationships. Without relationships, we'd be unable to carry out the Great Commandment to:

*"Love God with our heart, mind, soul, and strength
and love our neighbor as ourselves."*

We're humans—not rocks nor islands. We can't do this life alone—even from the get-go. We see this in infants. They can't come into existence alone and can't remain in existence alone. Babies are also naturally drawn to connect with others. From birth, when babies see or hear the cry of a distressed baby, they begin to cry. But if they hear a recording of their own cries, they don't cry. After fourteen months of age, babies not only cry when they hear another baby crying, they try to do something to relieve the other baby's distress.

Neurologists have shown that there is a literal brain-to-brain linkup between the parent and child, that shapes the future of the child. That face-to-face play and interaction gives the child the security that someone is fully on board to look out for you, they have your back, and will always stand by you. It sets the tone for all our future relationships. This relationship provides a secure base and a safe haven. The sense that you will manage, that you can make it. When you've had a healthy parental relationship, you're more equipped to take chances, tackle challenges, and effectively navigate jobs and work with others. To engage others and be soothed by them. To empathize with others who suffer. This parent-child attachment even shapes our understanding of God.

There's good news for all, even those who lacked that healthy parental bonding growing up. Studies have shown that good relationships, experiences with God and healthy encounters with others, can begin to heal childhood wounds we might have sustained from imperfect parents who likely had an unhealthy bond with their parents. It's not an easy road, but there's hope. By the miracle of God, we can have a loving parent-child attachment with our Creator. And the security and acceptance God gives us, empowers us to live with courage and compassion—seeking healing and extending love, even when our past has been hurtful. It happened, it's real, but it does not define us.

Our love for all is expressed in different ways and in different degrees. We can't be intimately close to everyone—it's impossible and unhealthy. And so we exhibit love to all in different ways—to strangers, spouses, friends, acquaintances, children, enemies, etc. Love takes different forms, depending upon context or situation: We celebrate in certain circumstances. Other times love challenges, cares, acts, refrains, appreciates, lets go, and upholds boundaries. Love isn't one size fits all. Rather, love is attuned and tailored to the other—always heart felt and situationally aware, but contextually appropriate. We're fully present. Engaged. We see the other not as an it, or a means, but as a living, breathing "you."

And so love moves us beyond self-interest. We desire the well-being of the other. We want there to be health and goodness in the space between us. We too want to be healthier, not sick from the relationship. And so love doesn't necessarily seek to fix, but it yearns to draw near, to repair, mend, and heal. And if possible, reconciliation, if the other is committed to that also. Love seeks to forgive and move forward. So how is it that we ache for each other and yet find relationships so difficult?

God made us social creatures, yet there are times we're tempted to "slam the door and stomp off into the night by ourselves." We're often selfish—the fancy word for this is sinful. Paul Tillich described us this way: Essentially good, but existentially estranged. We think harmful things or flawed approaches we prefer or default to will provide that connection and joy with others that we ache for. When this doesn't work, we double down and try harder with the same, misdirected approaches, thinking this time it will be different.

We want love and connection *our way*, but it doesn't happen, at least for long. We unwittingly put ourselves in solitary confinement. We need help. Outside help. We can't do this alone. Our way doesn't work. We've become more painfully aware of the effects of isolation this pandemic, but the challenges were there before COVID. Mental health professionals have written that loneliness has been a steadily growing health epidemic over the last four decades. During this time, there's been a breakdown in family units and societal bonds, an increase in anxiety and suicide.

What our society is doing isn't working. We need something new. We need shared meaning, shared purpose, and shared joy with loved ones to survive and thrive. What we need is a relational spirituality—a faith tapped into God that's shared with others. The sad thing is, I know this in my mind, but I often fall short in this area, even this week.

There are two sides to me that are often in a wrestling match—the loner, introverted side of me, and the part of me that loves connecting with others. All my fellow introverts out there I think are tracking with me here. Y'all have probably figured out that I have some bookish and monkish tendencies. I cherish and need time to read, write, reflect, and pray. It recharges my batteries. But there are also some pretty important things in my life too: like my wife and four kids. My extended family. You all—the church. Presbytery. My friends.

BUT look out when I think I haven't had enough down time. It ain't pretty. I'm not very fun to be with. Interruptions are not reframed as "opportunities for connection." "My time" becomes "my precious." I get greedy. I find myself looking and sounding strangely like Gollum in Lord of the Rings. In fact, I needed to apologize several times to Sarah while working on this very sermon on relationships. I was abrupt and rude because I wanted to be left alone to talk about the importance of relationships and

community! God have mercy. The unholy trinity of Me, myself, and I aren't enough. I need God and I need you, and you need me.

Todd Hall shares in *Relational Spirituality* that we're born to love and created to connect. We're loved into loving. And so the goal for our lives is to be a loving presence. In our scripture reading from Ecclesiastes, the Preacher tells us that to really enjoy what we have, we can't keep it to ourselves. We must give it away. True and lasting joy is shared joy.

And so, we can live our lives one of two ways:

- You can hate your neighbor... and so destroy yourself or,
- You can love your neighbor... and so love yourself.

Ecclesiastes calls us back to relationship—and away from an imbalanced life of being a grumpy hermit or a raging workaholic. Life isn't how much you earn, it's who you relate to. Meaning isn't in "your keep," but in your kith and kin. Life's a balance of extremes—one hand holds and the other gives. We labor and we love.

Instead of going at it alone, it's better to have someone to share the load with, to work and play together with. Rather than only looking out for number one, being a team player, you have others looking out for each other. They can help you see your blind spots that you've missed. You provide constructive feedback, they have gifts you don't have, and vice versa. We're all better together.

Think of Jesus—he had his alone times, But he always mentioned his Father. And he had his 12 disciples and the inner circle of three—Peter, John, and James. Jesus found time to get away, but he was with people—teaching, healing, and eating at dinner parties.

Good partnerships, not just marriage, but healthy alliances and friendships, are grounded in loyalty and care. They can bring the blessings and benefits of encouragement, comfort, profit, resilience, and strength, that we could never get alone.

So tend all your relationships. Water them. Don't neglect them. Don't abuse them. They are the garden of life. Fruits to be gleaned and shared. See each friendship as a sacred tie of three—you, the other, and God. "*A threefold cord is not easily broken,*" our passage says.

There are of course sacrifices and pain that comes with companionship. Sometimes it's easier to just do it alone. But life isn't about ease, efficiency, or expediency. "Life together" involves giving up some independence. You have to compromise a little. Collaborate. Work together. Die to yourself, so you can really live. It's worth it. Being in relationship, you have to think of another person's interests and convenience—not just your own. So slow down and listen to their reasoning and seek understanding. See things from a different angle, work at a different pace. It doesn't have to always be your way. Share your fears and disappointments.

Relationships are scary because you're vulnerable. Susceptible to being hurt, disappointing your friend. But then we can apologize. Confess. Receive and extend forgiveness. Make up. Move forward. This is life. This is where it's at. The joy and the struggle betters us. Matures us. Grows us. Grows our souls—making us into the kind of person that Enhances others more than depletes them. Life is so

much more than giving yourself only to yourself, because in the end, you'll be all alone with yourself. And that's no fun. Relationships get us out of that small country called the self.

It's good to read our "relation-ometer" from time to time:

So, how much of your day do you think of yourself?

How does your faith impact the way you treat those closest to you?

How much does it shape your attitude towards those you struggle with?

Who are "the we's" that might be good to think about more?

What do you need to work at less?

What people do you need to invest in more?

Living for we, not just me, makes a happier and healthier me. A happier and healthier everybody.

Two is better than one. Three is better than two. Probably four is better than three. There is strength in numbers. It's in relationship with others that God has designed us to flourish.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*Two Women at a Window*," Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, ca. 1655–60
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