

# “Hiding from God”

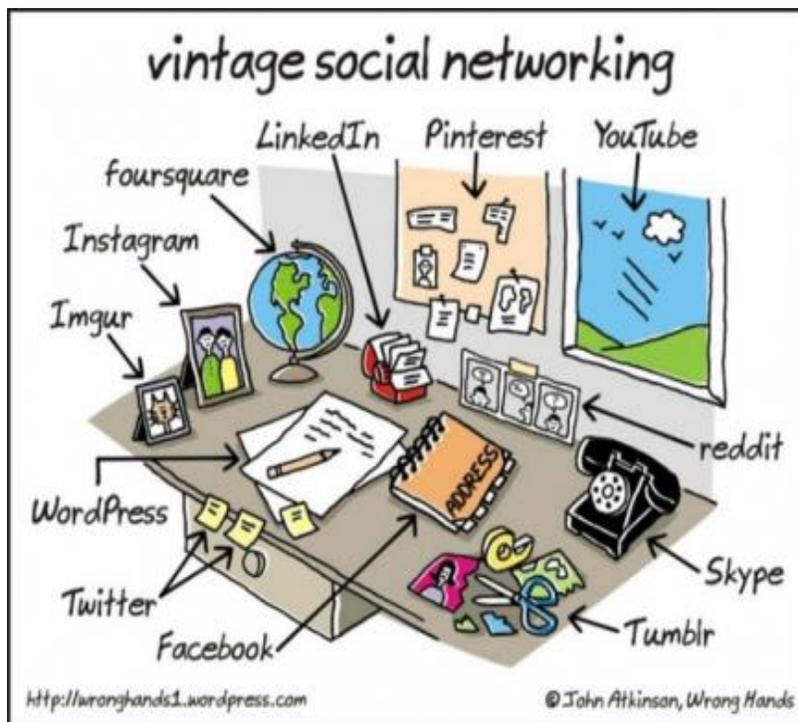
March 14, 2021 (wk 52- 1 year)  
John 3: 16-23 NRSV

Guest speaker: Laura Tobin  
Wall Street United Virtual Church

Can you believe it? It's been a year since we've been allowed to gather the way we used to — close together, singing together, in the sanctuary for worship. Who would have predicted this? I have missed gathering together.

As we all know, one of the results of Covid-19 has been the directive to stay home and to physically distance from others, and in so doing we have been cut off from the opportunity to connect with and to embrace those we love. I know people are longing to connect again with each other.

So many people are craving human touch. I think it is a little ironic that we have the potential to be more connected today than ever, and yet there is this overwhelming sense of isolation and loneliness. Our desire to see and our desire to be seen and known, runs so deep.



Take a look at this image. It is sort of written in two languages, illustrating the many ways we can connect, and yet we feel so disconnected due to the absence of real personal physical interactions.

Since the beginning of time, (at least time as introduced in Genesis), we have been created to live in community, with God and with one another. As we consider the Trinity — God the Creator, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit — we

see a perfect example of living in unity. This fragmented, divided world that we live in is just not right.

In the beginning Adam and Eve were created in the image of God, male and female — and God was pleased. They were created naked, and obviously in a very warm climate, where clothes were not necessary. Adam and Eve, so the story goes, existed in a beautiful garden, naming plants and animals and no doubt enjoying intimate moments without anyone else in the house. And all was

good, until the opportunity was presented to them to choose something better than what they already had. Can you relate to that — choosing something better than what God offers to us? And they ate from the tree of knowledge ... and then they hid.

Did they hide because of nakedness? I don't think so. After all they had been naked all along, and there is truly something beautiful about nakedness. Rather I believe that they hid because they had made a choice that caused them to step outside of God's initial plan. Eve and Adam had an expectation that they would know right from wrong, and be wiser for eating the fruit from the tree. I can't imagine they predicted how they would feel after they did something God asked them not to, or how disappointed they would be. Given this newly acquired wisdom, they were left feeling exposed and vulnerable, knowing they had done something that broke trust with God. And so they hid.

But God came looking for them. "Eve.... Adam.... Where are you?" They responded, "We heard you in the garden, and we were afraid because we had done something you asked us not to do."

Friends, God created us as beautiful beings.... beings with the ability to accept all God has to offer; or instead follow the propensity to choose the easy, to choose what looks better, to choose what others think looks better, to choose what in actuality numbs us and makes us want to hide our innermost selves. They knew they could not hide their inner selves from the God who created them -- so they hid their outer self as best they could. I am pretty convinced that although they may have felt broken, God did not see them any differently on the inside. He reached out to them in their brokenness.

We have been encouraged in this sermon series to consider how we can live a 'deeply formed life'. It starts with listening to God and hearing who we are in Christ and who are created to be. We are created to be reflections of Jesus to one another. This means we are called to love one another as Christ has loved us. In order to love well, we need to listen to one another, to hear the hurts, the fears, and to become aware of the incredible opportunities that exist as we acknowledge the beauty and potential of each other.

Last week, Pastor Kim challenged us to look inward, to see what is going on beneath the surface for each of us. It is important that we love ourselves, and that only happens as we tackle the things within us that long to sabotage us ... things like fear, anger, insecurity, jealousy, and perhaps unspoken addictions. When we start looking inward, (if you are anything like me), we sometimes see faults and imperfections before seeing the child of God that we are. We are often harder on ourselves than on anyone else. By looking inward we tend to see that there is this sense of inadequacy or shame in us, a failure to be someone or something we never meant to be.

Why is it that we feel or react this way? In a word, Shame! The world and the church try to shame us in so many different ways. Just a reminder: shame is

different from guilt. Guilt comes when we do something wrong or don't do what we should, and we feel it and we need to act on it. Shame, on the other hand, is that deeper sense of not being good enough, of having caused disappointment, either because the world, the church or someone we love tells us we aren't good enough — or perhaps because we tell that to ourselves.

Rich Villodas in chapters 7 & 8 of *The Deeply Formed Life* introduces the need for Sexual Wholeness if we are to truly live deeply formed lives. Friends, I don't honestly know what a sexually whole life is, but I do know that in marriage or a deeply committed relationship it is impossible to separate our spiritual life from our sexual life in any sort of healthy way. Villodas acknowledges the two are so deeply interconnected, as they both point to our desire to be deeply loved and deeply known.

What is the link between sexuality and spirituality? In a word, everything. A deep, healthy committed relationship looks not just to please the self, but the other as well. There is a deep soul connection that happens when couples connect spiritually around their sexual intimacy.

However, the connection between sexuality and spirituality has not always been the case. History and the church tell us that there is often a separation, a division -- a sexual ethic that says desires and longings of the body are bad and sinful. As Rich says, this attitude / theology leads to the formation of sexuality that looks like a starvation diet ... a starvation diet in which the soul is exalted to the point of denying the body. It sounds kind of old fashioned, but this kind of theology still permeates some church culture today.

I remember growing up in a school where they preached that female bodies were a temptation to others, and that we were to get changed in closets, lest we tempt another. It was like a starvation diet —boyfriend/ girlfriend relationships were not allowed, never mind any sort of sexual relationships. They were all about the purity movement and reminding us that marriage was to be between a man and a woman and that any sort of self-pleasuring was wrong.

Homosexuality was thought to be an abomination and to be avoided at all costs. There was a complete absence of communication around God's design for beautiful and healthy sexual relationships. This type of teaching continues to this day and is very damaging to everyone, but particularly to the LGBTQ+ community. I am grateful that Wall Street is a more inclusive place, but we still have a ways to go.

The second spiritual formation diet is the fast food diet, or the worldly diet. If the starvation diet is about repression, the fast food diet is about reduction. Reducing our deepest longings to our physical desires, and denying the soul.

In a quest to be known, and have sexual desires met, some go looking to have these longings filled by whatever means are available, as often and as quickly as possible. This 'fast food diet' that Rich Villodas describes is all about personal satisfaction and pleasure, and not about honouring the other. In fact, it often reduces the other person to no more than an object. Whether we are in

search of immediate sexual gratification, or the need to fill some other longing with unhealthy addictive choices, it can be easy to identify with this diet at times.

Villodas introduces the third option as *'the banquet meal'*. That is what we all yearn for — a feast that doesn't just fill our bellies with tasty things, but that nourishes our souls as well. He suggests that this invitation is open to all — whether married or single — to a life of communion, joy and delight. Don't forget that we are created right from the beginning with a need for community and with sexual desires and a longing to be known. Deep healthy sexual formation can happen when we are fully present to the other, honouring them in intimate ways, both inside and outside the bedroom. Sadly, this banquet option does not happen nearly as often as it should.

Friends, Rich Villodas has many good things to say in the book. However he did mention in chapter 4 that he had a blind spot where it came to race, and that he needed to work on fixing it. Villodas also has a blind spot where it comes to the LGBTQ+ community. He will not marry queer folks or allow them to serve in any leadership capacity unless they are celibate. I am grateful that Pastor Kim and those in leadership at Wall Street have a more inclusive policy where it comes to the LGBTQ+ community. I've honestly struggled with presenting any material from these chapters, knowing that Villodas and I have very different viewpoints where it comes to being an inclusive, non-harmful community.

Because there has been so much negative messaging from the church and the world around healthy sexuality, it causes people to act/react in unhealthy ways. Very often those consumed by pornography just hunker down and never let anyone know their inner struggle. As much as they long for connection and intimacy, they are incapable of meaningful intimate relationships. Often those who believe sex is dirty and only for procreation in marriage, end up being unable to explore the beauty and desires of sexual intimacy. And those in the LGBTQ+ community often live out of deep shame until they find a community that welcomes them. Single folks sometimes struggle with the lie that they are not acceptable or lovable unless they are in a sexual relationship.

We need to address lies told by both the church and the world, if all of our community is to move on experiencing sexual wholeness. As quoted by one of my favourite authors, Nadia Bolz-Weber, "My Christian faith tells me that good news is only good if it is for everyone, otherwise it is just ideology. Sexual flourishing is for every type of body, every type of gender, every type of sex drive and every type of human. Sexual flourishing is for people who choose celibacy, for those who have one partner their whole lives; for those who don't conform to gender norms. It's for those who are divorced, single, dating, gay, straight, kink, vanilla. For those who have hurt me and those whom I have hurt. All are invited to the open table (banquet) to the fullness of grace, the fullness of their erotic selves, their sensual selves, their loving selves. Everyone, without exception."

The bottom line to all of this is not that we are trying to be made more like Jesus just so we can be more like Him, but so that **as** we become more like

Jesus, others can see something reflective of His glory in us. We are not deepening our spiritual growth just to get better ourselves, but we do so for the sake of honouring others and creating a healthier, more inclusive world.

Nakedness was distorted and shame was discovered in the Garden of Eden as a result of breaking trust with God. However, that is not the end of the story. The story continues, and climaxes as Jesus hangs naked on a tree, on a hill, for me.

Friends, I don't know what sexual baggage or other lies you are listening to today, but I want to encourage you to hear the loving words of God: "Where are you? Why are you hiding? I gave my son for you...you are enough. You are deeply loved." Amen.

**John 3:16-21**

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

(p.s.)

Last week I learned that March 14<sup>th</sup> in the United Church of Canada, is PIE day: a day where the church states, Publicly. Intentionally. Explicitly, that we acknowledge and accept all. +