

A Sermon
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A God Who Won't Let Us Alone

Genesis 3:1-13

Privacy issues. Privacy matters. Privacy concerns. Privacy policy. Privacy law. Privacy rights. Privacy rules. Our daily lives and discourse are saturated with issues of privacy. You walk into your doctor's office and they hand you a copy of their Notice of Privacy Practices. You open your mailbox and your credit card company has sent you a copy of their annual privacy statement. You lift your finger to click on "Place Your Order," when a window suddenly pops up asking you to check the box indicating that you have read and accept the terms of service, including their privacy guidelines. You check your inbox and discover an email from your internet provider spelling out what they plan to do to protect your personal data. One way or another, day in and day out, you're going to encounter situations, circumstances, and choices that have something to do with privacy.

One dictionary defines privacy this way: "In constitutional law, the right of people to make personal decisions regarding intimate matters; under the common law, the right of people to lead their lives in a manner that is reasonably secluded from public scrutiny, whether such scrutiny comes from a neighbor's prying eyes, an investigator's eavesdropping ears, or a news photographer's intrusive camera; and in statutory law, the right of people to be free from unwarranted drug testing and electronic surveillance."¹ Or perhaps even the right to be protected from a nosey member of the clergy.

I say that because shortly after beginning my ministry here at Grace Baptist Church, I wrote a newsletter article emphasizing the role of prayer in a pastor's work. I highlighted the fact that in my covenant with you, I intended to be a praying pastor. But when the newsletter was actually printed, the "a" in praying was accidentally left out. So rather than being a "praying pastor," it appeared that I intended to be a "prying pastor." At that point, some of you may have been wondering exactly how I planned to poke around in your life and your business.

As you can tell, the concept of "privacy" has different levels of meaning, depending on the particular category of law you're considering. There are lots of nuances involved in applying the idea of privacy. But the bottom line is that Americans believe in it, lawyers build cases with it, and courts issue rulings based on it. And yet, with all the complexity and contestability attached to the notion of privacy, maybe we do well to come back to lawyers Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis, who described it basically as "the right to be let alone."

In the Garden of Eden, there was no right to be let alone. Adam and Eve had no legal document they could present to God showing that certain matters were none of his business. They couldn't block God from their Facebook page. Instead, their best shot at privacy was to cloth themselves with fig leaves and go hide in the bushes. But this was no match for God's determination to be with them and to know them, and to have them know him. Adam and Eve's attempt at secrecy failed. Not because they were bad at hiding but because God was good at searching.

Adam and Eve heard the sound of footsteps. Not the footsteps of one of the creatures, but the footsteps of the Creator. But that makes no sense. Wouldn't the world's Maker be satisfied just to sit back and savor the beauty of his handiwork? Wouldn't he prefer just to

govern from a distance, rather than getting too entangled in the affairs of the world? Wouldn't God himself prefer some privacy? No, it turns out that the Maker of the heavens and the earth is deeply committed to being involved in his creation. Rather than leaving the world alone, God enters into the life of the world in order to relate to the creatures, especially the humans he has formed. In fact, he goes so far as to take on human form and go for a walk among the creatures.

God comes looking, and asking questions. He's determined to get to the bottom of this disruption in the goodness of his creation. The whole scene turns into a judicial inquiry, with God probing deeper into who saw what, who said what, and who did what, and when, and why. Eventually, God's line of questioning reveals that the humans trusted themselves more than they trusted him. Their sin was a matter of wanting to be on their own, to operate totally out of their own resources, rather than rely upon the goodness and trustworthiness of God. The result is a breakdown in relationship with God, and with one another. Intimacy turns into alienation. Being known and loved is now overcome by estrangement.

One of the manifestations of our estrangement from God and from one another is the way that we approach the issue of privacy. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that we should reject the idea of privacy, or repeal all the laws that are grounded in it. Privacy, especially as it's woven into our legal system and shapes our form of government, plays a critical part in upholding personal freedom and human dignity. It creates space for individuals and groups to grow and flourish. It helps protect us from abusive and intrusive uses of authority. So there is an important and necessary role for privacy in our lives, individually and together.

But in order to be who God has created us to be, and intends us to be, we need more than just autonomy and space. According to today's Scripture, which narrates the intrusion of sin and the consequences of our sinful actions, we're made to be known by God and to know God, to be loved by God and to love God, to be connected to God and to one another. And yet, we fail to trust God and to put our confidence in his goodness the way that we should. We're prone to want to be on our own and to rely upon our own resources, rather than living in God's provision and purposes. In our desire for self-sovereignty rather than God's sovereignty, we become disobedient, and then try to hide or conceal ourselves and our deeds from God.

But the God who has created us is the God who knows us. This is reflected in the Book of Common Prayer, where a prayer called the "Collect for Purity" begins this way: "Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid." So much for privacy. Our lives are always being watched by God. Or as one person has written: "Perhaps the best starting place for a Christian view of privacy is to ask: Does anyone have privacy in the presence of an all-knowing God?"²

As the psalmist has put it: "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord. You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain" (Psalm 139:1-6).

The fact that God knows us, so fully and completely and deeply, is more than just a matter of divine surveillance. It's a matter of divine love, and of God's desire to have us live in close, personal, intimate relationship with him and with one another. So much so that he has come to us in Christ, has dealt with our sin and restored us to communion with himself. But as today's Scripture reveals, our "sinful default"³ is to withdraw from God and from one

another, to be autonomous rather than be connected. And this inclination to run away from God and disconnect from others often feeds into our distorted understanding of privacy.

In an essay that he wrote nearly twenty years ago, Jonathan Franzen captured the kind of social isolation that can come with the pursuit of autonomy and privacy. He wrote:

In the suburbs and exurbs where the typical American lives today, tiny nuclear families inhabit enormous houses, in which each person has his or her own bedroom and, sometimes, bathroom. Compared even with suburbs in the sixties and seventies, when I was growing up, the contemporary condominium development or gated community offers a striking degree of anonymity. It's no longer the rule that you know your neighbors. Communities increasingly tend to be virtual, the participants either faceless or firmly in control of the faces they present. Transportation is largely private: the latest S.U.V.s are the size of living rooms and come with onboard telephones, CD players, and TV screens; behind the tinted windows of one of these high-riding, I-see-you-but-you-can't-see-me mobile PrivacyGuard® units, a person can be wearing pajamas or a licorice bikini, for all anybody knows or cares.⁴

We love our space and our autonomy. We zealously guard our private worlds. We cherish the "right to be let alone." It's part of our cultural creed.

As I've said, there's a place for privacy. It matters. But from a Christian point of view, what matters more is being known and loved and connected. This gathering today is evidence of that. Instead of spending Sunday morning in the privacy of your own home, you've come together with others to worship in a public setting. In a day and time when many contend that religion is just a private matter between myself and my God, something I can do on my own, in my house, within the sacred precincts of my heart, you've done something very different and very countercultural. You've put down whatever device you were watching (and who knows, may have been watching you), you've gotten out beyond your four walls, and you've assembled with others to worship a God who refuses to let us alone. A God who comes close to us, even when we're trying to stay far from him. A God who sees us, hears us, watches us, examines us, searches us, questions us, and restores us.

It's no surprise, then, that the community of faith created by this all-knowing God is a fellowship where we come out of hiding and open our lives to one another. Now this doesn't mean that we're all equally capable of sharing the details of our circumstances. Some of us are more open and expressive about our lives, while others are more quiet and reserved. But we've all been sought out, known, and redeemed by God. So when we come together, whether one on one, in small groups, or as an entire congregation, we reveal ourselves to others. We talk about where we're broken and what needs to be healed. We ask for one another's prayers. We celebrate one another's achievements. We express our joys and our sorrows. We cry in front of others. We embrace one another. We profess our faith. We confess our sins. We share our testimonies and tell our stories.

In a culture where the "right to be let alone" is sacred, so is the life of a local congregation like ours. This body of believers called Grace Baptist Church is no virtual world, but a flesh and blood fellowship brought into existence by a God who invades our privacy, reveals himself to us, and shows us how to truly know one another.

¹ <https://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/privacy>

² Chris Ridgeway, "Fixing Our Privacy Settings." Christianity Today website. August 20, 2018. Accessed September 20, 2018 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/september/theology-of-privacy-fixing-our-settings.html>>.

³ Ridgeway, "Fixing Our Privacy Settings."

⁴ Jonathan Franzen, "The Imperial Bedroom." The New Yorker website. October 12, 1998 Issue. Accessed September 20, 2018 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1998/10/12/imperial-bedroom>>.