

“Marriage: A Commitment to Communicate”

Proverbs 15:1, 18; 22:24 & 25:5; Ephesians 4:25-32

7/16/2000 Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

(Reading Newspaper, apparently ignoring the congregation) I'll be with you in a minute (looking back to the newspaper).

Oh, you're thinking I'm not communicating? You're right. A speaker who would ignore the listeners would obviously be failing to communicate. This would be true between any two people – particularly in marriage, which is supposed to be the most intimate and extensive communication between two human beings. How well a couple communicates is exactly how well the friendship, courting or marriage grows – whether it is a new relationship or one that has been seasoned by years.

There are many ways in which we communicate with one another. The most obvious is our verbal communication. The words we use make a difference. To say, “I think the casserole is satisfactory” is different than saying “I think the casserole tastes wonderful.”

We also communicate non-verbally. Our tone can vary. When asked whether a tie matches a particular suit, we could reply, “Sure, that tie matches!” Or we might say, “*Sure*, . . . that tie matches.” We communicate with our eyes, our touch, our posture and gestures. Everything we do is some form of communication.

If you are in sales, you know that if your potential client keeps looking back at a stack of work, or their watch, frequently losing eye contact with you during your presentation, you have little hope of making that sale.

We communicate with others because we must. As human beings, we are inter-dependent social creatures. Because marriage is the most intimate and intense human relationship, sharing is particularly important. Marriage should be a communication of heart, body and mind. Unless communication in marriage goes beyond the things of household maintenance and childcare, . . . unless we also talk about our most important thoughts, feelings and experiences, our marriage will always remain stuck on the same plane.

Sadly enough, some people can not drive along in a car and talk with their spouse, so they turn on the radio, hoping to hide the silence. Many people share more with their friends than they do with their spouse. Consequently, they have a better relationship with a friend than with their partner.

You might have seen the musical “Fiddler on the Roof” at some point.¹ It remains a classic because it expresses a wide range of people's experience and emotion. You recall that it is a rather touching portrayal of the family experiences of a couple who initially married one another out of an old-world European family arranged marriage. Through the years, they had grown to love and accept each other but they had little communication in their relationship. Here is one of their dialogues.

“Golde, do you love me?” asks the husband.

“Do I what?” responds his wife.

“Do you love me?” he asks her again.

¹ **Norman Jewison's** adaptation of the long-running Broadway musical is set in the Ukrainian ghetto village of Anatevka (the film was actually lensed in Yugoslavia). Israeli actor **Topol** repeats his London stage role as Tevye the Milkman, whose equilibrium is constantly being challenged by his poverty, the prejudicial attitudes of non-Jews, and the romantic entanglements of his five daughters. Whenever the weight of the world becomes too much for him, Tevye carries on lengthy conversations with God, who does not answer but is at least more willing to listen than the milkman's remonstrative wife Golde. After arranging a marriage between his oldest daughter Tzeitel and wealthy butcher Lazar Wolf, Tevye is forced to do some quick rearranging when the girl falls in love with poor tailor Motel Kamzoil. Fancying himself more broad-minded than his gentile oppressors, Tevye cannot accept the notion that his other daughter Chava would want to marry Fyedka, a non-Jew. And after shouting the praises of "tradition," Tevye must change his tune-and his entire life-when he and his neighbors are forced out of Anatevka by the Czar's minions. Topol's costars include **Norma Crane** as Golde, Yiddish theater legend **Molly Picon** as Yente the matchmaker, and **Leonard Frey** as Motel. The film earned \$25 million at the box office, making it the last successful Hollywood-financed movie musical. -- Hal Erickson, *All Movie Guide*

She responds, “Do I love you? With our daughters getting married and there’s trouble in the town; . . . you’re upset, you’re worn out; . . . go inside, go lie down; maybe it’s indigestion?”

Her husband continues, “Golde, I’m asking you a question. Do you love me?”

She responds, “You’re a fool” (with a smile on her face).

He doesn’t give up, but says, “I know, but do you love me?”

She finally answers, “Do I love you? For twenty-five years I’ve washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cow. After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?” And the dialogue goes on.



When was the last time you looked your spouse in the eye and unashamedly told him or her you love them? You know romance has largely died in many marriages today because communication has died.

Our text in Ephesians tells a lot about communication. It is a general statement about how we relate but it can easily be applied to our closest relationships.

One of the first things it advises is honesty. “Put away falsehood and speak the truth.” The character of all communication should be honesty, telling the truth to one another about all things. This takes not only an honesty with the other person but honesty with ourselves.

Those in the counseling professions continue to tell us in their books that marital tensions intensify whenever at least one person in the relationship fails to be honest with themselves. Often, when there is a conflict and he or she fails to face the difficulty, they think that it will blow over or automatically work itself out in time. It takes work and a healthy sense of your own self-worth to face conflicts. You have to risk facing the pain.

Classically, men (in the past) had been taught to turn away from the work of dealing with emotional conflict (when we knew an aggressive physical fight won’t solve the matter). In many cases, instead of intentionally dealing with the emotional complexity of

an issue, we sometimes ignored it and put our energies into something else we knew we could handle, like our careers. Not a particularly effective way to handle a conflict.

In a similar way, women (of the past) had been taught to turn away from the work of dealing with emotional conflict (when they knew an argument or debate won’t solve the matter). In this case, instead of intentionally dealing with the emotional complexity of an issue, they sometimes ignored it and put their energies into something else in which they knew they could handle, like a hobby, cleaning or having another child. Also, not a particularly effective way to handle a conflict.

We know these avoidance tactics don’t solve conflicts because even after significant accomplishments are made in one’s career or when the children are raised and heading toward emotional, physical and financial independence, the problems in the relationship have not gone away but have intensified. James tells us to confess our sins to one another, to communicate even our weaknesses and fears. Do we dare tell our spouse how we have failed or about something foolish we’ve done?

When we get married, we commit ourselves to one another, “For better or worse, in wealth or in poverty, in sickness or in health,” and so on. We don’t commit ourselves to one another with the condition that we will be perfect. The *ideal* is to accept and love one another to the extent that both the husband and wife know that the other accepts them – no matter what went on in the past and no matter what the present may hold – but this obviously doesn’t mean “anything goes.” Marriage is secure and safe when you know your partner is able to vulnerably share his or her failures with you. It is then that you know the other person feels safe with you. Are you an accepting person to your marriage partner?²

Honesty sometimes brings conflicts out in the open and there is disagreement. The James text anticipates this, saying “Be angry but do not sin!” This admits that there are going to be times when a disagreement frustrates us – we’ve got to expect that. Whatever the conflict, we’re to settle it before we go to bed that night.

² This is based on the Christian principle of “unconditional love.”

The text wisely advises, “Don’t let the sun go down on your wrath.”³

There are several poor ways in which to communicate, as everyone knows who has taken an assertiveness training class. Let’s mention just three: temper, manipulation and withdrawal.

For those of us who operate with a short fuse, we should be mindful of the difference between anger and a bad temper. There is legitimate cause for anger in all of us but when it becomes a matter of temper, the problem usually has to do with unequal power.

There are counseling groups, today, who have people practice expressing their anger. People with pent up anger are taught to express themselves by throwing pillows across the room or breaking (easily expendable) things – saying that it is good for them to get it out of their system.

The danger with venting anger, for the sake of venting it, is that it can easily become selfish, like a baby crying. As Proverbs also says, a person who continually vents anger is like a city without a wall around it. Some people who have made their expressions of anger a habit, rationalize it by saying, “Now look, I was born with a temper. I’ve always been hard-headed and I naturally get mad when things don’t go my way. That’s just the way I am.”

What that speech actually states is, “I’ve always had my own way. I’m used to having more power than everyone else and I expect people around me to make all the compromises so I can keep having my way.” So a common point of failing communication is when one expects and demands more power than the other in the relationship and if that power is not received, there is temper.

A second failure in communication is manipulation. Usually, manipulative behavior is rooted in fear. The manipulator fears that their partner might get angry. So rather than communicate directly by expressing their needs and demands honestly, people use indirect means of expressing their frustration, sometimes nagging or addressing other issues than what is causing the conflict.

³ Eph. 4:26

Surprisingly, the Bible has several verses about nagging, but because the book of Proverbs was largely written from a male point of view, (in a culture when only the men had the power), it usually portrayed the woman in the act of nagging. Making the language more inclusive and fair, the Bible says:

“The quarrellings of a nagging person are like a constantly dripping leak. It is better to dwell in a corner of an attic than to live with a nagging person in a big house. To hide a nagging person is to hide the wind; to restrain that person is like restraining the wind itself.”⁴

Many times, when someone nags us, it is our own fault as well as theirs. When we ignore our partner’s needs, treating their advice like it doesn’t matter; . . . when we act as if we think our partner isn’t as smart as we think we are, it is damaging. The other person comes to feel hopeless, saying, “What’s the use. I’m not listened to anyway and the only way change comes about is through unpleasant nagging, so that’s what I’ve got to do to get things done.”

We’ve talked about dominating, insisting on having all the power and expressing our tempers out of selfishness. We’ve talked about indirect and around-the-corner communication, like nagging. The third and most common failure in communication is withdrawal – the failure to speak about what is on our mind and heart.

I was raised in the 1950’s watching television shows like “Leave it to Beaver” and “Ozzie and Harriett.” Theodore Cleaver’s parents, Ward and June, went placidly from one episode to another and only occasionally would Ward, (the so-called “head of the house”), come out of his den and play the heavy – laying down the law and setting up the guidelines for working out the crisis in the next twenty minutes.

The Ozzie and Harriett characters were never ruffled by anything. If they were living today, dealing with the things often faced by some households, one scenario would go like this.

Ozzie enters the front door and as he puts his overcoat in the front hall closet with a smile, he calls out “Harriett, I’m home.” In a second, Harriett emerges from the kitchen, (with the calmness of an experienced

⁴ See Proverbs 19:13; 27:15

Cub Scout Den mother about to wipe up an overturned paper cup of Kool Aid), and says, “Rick’s rock band is in jail under arrest for possible possession of hard drugs; David just dropped out of college and wants to blow up the Pentagon and move to Montana and grow dental floss; and my best friend thought you and I should get a divorce. To which Ozzie would respond, (in character), “Say Harriett, have you seen my golf clubs?” For an enjoyable parody on this 1950’s “don’t ever deal with anything complex in your marriage life-style,” rent the movie “Pleasantville.”

Many marriages collapse because one or both people harbor resentments and conflicts within them – never honestly facing the source of the pain in their lives. They let the sun go down on their anger. They go to bed at night with things on their minds that have been bothering them during the day, during the week and perhaps even during the last several years.

Marriage counselors have often written that most troubles relating to sex in marriage are usually a result of not facing the problems of the day because of a lack of communication. Because human sexuality is the highest form of communication between two married persons, if their lives are out of kilter and communication is not honest and total, from day to day, it’s not very good at night either.

In communication, there is a tactic that usually helps with all conflicts and that is separating the issue from the person’s self worth. We’ve mentioned this here previously.

Whether we’re thinking about a marital problem, a disagreement with a friend or a dispute on a board of the church, we should always try to wisely focus on the issue or the subject that is the cause of the dispute – not the personality. To do this, the task is to focus on keeping our words from addressing the other person’s motives or worth. This is because whenever any of us feel attacked, we tend to lose our temper and our own ability to separate the issue being discussed from the people involved.

When it comes down to the basics, each of us have fragile self-concepts. All of us are insecure in our own ways – it’s just that each of us have our own ways of coping and compensation.

Verse 29 says, “Don’t let evil talk come out of

your mouth but say things that build each other up, as fits the occasion.” So in every exchange in an argument, determine if you are confronting behavior or an issue rather than attacking the person.

The best relationships grow in the garden of communication. God has shown us that love is a verb – love acts. ‘God loved the world so much that God’s only Son was given.’ God loved us and gave Self for us.

Jesus said it this way, “If your enemy hungers, give him (or her) something to eat. If your enemy thirsts, offer something to drink.” Jesus taught us to give to one another and giving always begins first with communication.

What should be of most value to us, . . . what we should treasure more than anything else on this earth, is our closest relationship. Conversely, what we should fear the most is the possibility that we may not be able to communicate well enough to maintain this most precious relationship.

You and I have seen many married people talking with others about their marital problems, unable and afraid to talk them over at home. You and I have seen a tremendous amount of distancing in relationships – the unequal distribution of power and the truly pathetic quality of communication some couples have.

Some of us need to begin again in our marriages. Some of us have spent years together and still seem miles apart. Frankly, some have totally given up hope of any improvements. We’re hiding things, we’re bottling things up inside, hoping they’ll go away. We don’t want to expend more energy, swimming through those waves in the relationship. But remember that the more we keep inside, the heavier it gets and the sooner we’ll sink.

We can make a new beginning, if we commit ourselves to share, . . . to fully open up with one another. Because how can there ever be change unless we face that change together?

Begin today by changing the channel and tuning into your partner’s frequency. Adjust the focus, . . . and focus in on their feelings, thoughts and dreams. Show the other people in your life that your love for them is the only thing of worth in this entire world. After all, marriage, or any relationship with another person, is a result of a commitment to communicate. Ask God for

help and you will be able to do it. ■

