

“I Thought I Heard You Say” November 22, 2009

When I was in high school and college, I worked for the Chamber of Commerce at the tourist information center in my hometown of Madison, Indiana. Part of my responsibilities included conducting walking tours of the historic parts of the city, and it was always fun to meet the folks who were intrigued with the beauty and quaintness of the town.

On one occasion, I was in front of the courthouse, and I was pointing to the firehouse located across the street. I had just finished telling the visitors that it was rather unusual for a town of this size to have a volunteer fire department, but we did, and it was one of the oldest ones in the state. Furthermore, I said, it was very effective and efficient.

Just at that moment, the fire alarm went off. We called it “Ferdinand” in Madison, and it would make this loud shrieking noise that rang numbers in three blasts, like 3-2-5, and that indicated the box number of the location nearest where the fire was. The volunteer firefighters would then race to the firehouse, or drive their cars to the box location to find and fight the fire.

We were standing right across from the number one fire company, and within just a few minutes, the door flew up at the firehouse, and the number ones came out of the station, and went racing east up Main Street. Within just a couple of minutes, the Number Four fire truck came flying down the street next to where we were standing with our hands over our ears, and raced west down Main Street. Now the number that was still ringing in our ears was easy to count, but obviously, one of those fire companies or fire truck drivers had misheard the number, and one of them—I never learned which one—was going the wrong direction. What we had there was a failure to communicate.

Sometimes our connections with one another are a little bit like that. We don’t listen carefully; we misunderstand; we assume we know, and don’t ask questions to clarify. That’s when there’s a breakdown in our communication, and it sometimes leads to trouble in our relationships.

You’re probably aware that Thanksgiving happens this week, and many of us will be spending more than the usual amount of time with family or friends. As much as we

might enjoy one another’s company, we’d probably have to admit that there are also some stresses and tensions that go along with extended time with those closest to us. Some of the little annoying habits that used to bother us, still do; some of the closeness gets a little intense; sometimes the teasing and joking goes a little too far, and already tender feelings get hurt. As hard as we try to avoid it, our connections get strained beyond belief, and what’s supposed to be an enjoyable time turns into turmoil and frustration.

I want us to think about that today, and see how we might be able to do some “preventive” work to keep that kind of thing from happening. How might we relate to family and friends a little differently that could possibly ease the tensions, rather than creating them? What are some of the basics of communication that we might practice more consciously that could help us all have a more peaceful, a more pleasant holiday?

There’s one thing that’s important to remember when it comes to communication, and that is that the word “communication” itself comes from the Latin “communico,” and means “share.” Therefore, communication is two-way; it is not a one-sided monologue, but involves two or more people, and it includes talking and listening. It’s not just one or the other; it’s both. So from the very start, we need to do our part to make sure everyone is included, and that we or someone else doesn’t dominate the conversation, because then it ceases to be a conversation.

Whenever I lead a workshop and have people break into small groups to discuss one topic or another, I have sort of a standard admonition to the participants. I ask those who tend to talk a lot to hold back a bit, and allow space for others to share their thoughts, since we all have wisdom to contribute. Likewise, I request that those who tend to always keep quiet in a group to speak up at least once or twice so the others can hear what they have to say. Maybe thinking in those terms can alter some of the discussions that inevitably evolve when we’re with our family and friends.

There’s one basic ground rule I think we have to insist upon, and that’s the necessity for common courtesy. Let’s not interrupt when someone else is speaking; let’s not name call or demean our sister or brother; let’s be respectful and honor the other as a person of worth and dignity and treat each other accordingly. If there’s one thing we all seek, it’s acceptance

and knowing we're valued. Setting aside our tendency to judge could help us show that acceptance to one another.

And let's remember that our viewpoint isn't the only one, and it isn't the only "right" way to think or see a particular issue. We're all different and have different life experiences that shape us into our own unique beings. That's what makes life interesting, but it can also provide its own challenges. As Theodore Kheel once noted, "We're all myopic—we see things from our own point of view. I find over and over that when people have a dispute, they have an understanding of what they want but not what the other fellow wants." Perhaps it would be helpful to remember his wise words.

There are two clear aspects to good communication: speaking and listening; both take some skill and attention. As someone has said, "Communication requires both effective sending and receiving." How do we make sure we both send and receive effectively?

When we are the one sharing something with another person, we need to try to do so as clearly and concisely as we possibly can. I'm afraid we don't always do that very well. You probably have heard the saying that goes: "I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant." There's a two-sided issue that's imbedded in that phrase, and part of it has to do with what we say and how we say it. Words are not our only form of communication, as I'm sure we're aware. There's certainly the tone of our voice when we say something, and that tone conveys the seriousness or the lightness of what we're sharing. Just ask any kid and he or she can quickly tell you when Mom or Dad are angry or put out and impatient, just by the tone of their voice.

And not only is the tone of our voice, it is also our body language. Arms crossed tell the listener that we're a little defensive, and protecting ourselves. A frown conveys our displeasure; downcast eyes, or not making eye contact can indicate our insecurity, and being uncomfortable with what we're trying to say. So, it is important to speak with as much clarity as possible in order to be sure we're understood. And it's not just clarity; it's honesty. We need to say what we mean and mean what we say. Creating a scenario that turns conversation into a guessing game is just simply not the way to connect well with one another.

An equally important part of good communication has to do with listening, and listening carefully and attentively. It just plain doesn't work to try to have a conversation with someone who's reading the paper, or watching TV, or playing a game on the computer. When we really are listening to the other person, we set aside all the distractions, look the other person in the eye, and concentrate on what he or she is saying, trying our best to put ourselves in their place and hear them, really hear them.

We also need to be in the moment, and not trying to come up with what we're going to say next, or what experience we've had that we can't wait to tell the other. That also means setting aside our own agenda, and being aware of our own biases and filters that have a way of distorting what we hear the other person saying. To the best of our ability, we need to set aside those agendas, our anger or frustration or whatever else is getting in the way, and focus on listening.

The Bible passage we have for today is really about how Jesus used stories to get through to his listeners, but that's not the point I want us to remember. This is from Mark's Gospel, and the first time I really studied Mark the thing that hit me the most was that Jesus was forever asking his followers, "Do you get it?" Well, in this passage, he's not exactly asking that, but our version puts it like this: "Are you listening to this? Really listening?"

That's a question that we may need to ask one another, and it's certainly one we can ask ourselves. Are we listening...REALLY listening? Are we listening well enough to repeat what our friend said, and include what they meant? That's what really listening is all about.

I know effective communication may be a tall order for us to consider during the Thanksgiving weekend, because we all probably have some bad habits to break and tendencies to control. However, I really hope we will give it a try. If we treat one another with courtesy and respect, if we are exacting about how we say what we say, and if we really listen with our whole being, I have a sense this could be the best Thanksgiving ever!

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we will take to heart my paraphrase of what Grenville Kleiser once said, "Conversation is one of the most precious of the arts. Without it, no one can really know his or her fellow human beings." Let's guard our

connections as a treasure and be determined to relate to one another in love. OK?

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace.
Amen.