

Communication Breakdown

21 January 07

Mark 4:9-12 (*The Message*)

“Are you listening to this? Really listening?” When they were off by themselves, those who were close to Jesus, along with the Twelve, asked about the stories. He told them, “You’ve been given insight into God’s kingdom—you know how it works. But to those who can’t see it yet, everything comes in stories, creating readiness, nudging them toward receptive insight. These are people—whose eyes are open but don’t see a thing, whose ears are open but don’t understand a word, who avoid making an about-face and getting forgiven.”

Sermon nugget: We seem to have a lot of problems with communicating effectively. Why? And what can we do to change it?

Did you hear about the woman who went to see her doctor? The doc prescribed a strict regimen, saying, “I want you to eat normally for a day, then skip a day, drinking only water. Repeat this three times, and by the time I see you next Thursday, you’ll have lost at least 6 pounds.”

The patient promised to follow the regimen and went home. She returned to the doctor’s office the next week, and had lost almost 15 pounds! The doctors was very pleased, and said, “Excellent progress. And all you lost all that weight simply by following my instructions?”

The woman nodded, and said, “It wasn’t easy, though. On the third day, I thought I was going to die.” From hunger, huh?” asked the doctor. “No,” she replied, “from all that skipping.” It sounds as though there was a little breakdown in communication between doctor and patient.

The same kind of thing is evident in some signs that sometimes get posted, and perhaps do not convey the intended message. For instance---

“Toilet out of order. Please use floor below.”

In an office: “After coffee break, staff should empty the coffee pot and stand upside down on drain board.”

Or outside a secondhand shop: “We exchange anything—bicycles, washing machines, etc. Why not bring your spouse along and get a wonderful bargain?”

Or a sign seen at a conference that read: “For anyone who has children and doesn’t know it, there is a day care on the first floor.”

And finally, there’s the one on a repair shop door that read: “We can repair anything. (Please knock hard on the door—the bell doesn’t work.)” Those signs are evidence of a failure to communicate.

Sometimes I wonder if you and I aren’t a lot like those signs or that doctor. We may be using all the words, but somehow the intended message isn’t getting through. We have a breakdown in communication.

My guess is that all of us have experienced something like that at one time or another. That’s why I really like the Bible

passage we have for today, because it shows that Jesus had the same sort of difficulty at times. Our passage reads like this:

“Are you listening to this? Really listening?”

When they were off by themselves, those who were close to Jesus, along with the Twelve, asked about the stories. He told them, “You’ve been given insight into God’s kingdom—you know how it works. But to those who can’t see it yet, everything comes in stories, creating readiness, nudging them toward receptive insight. These are people—whose eyes are open but don’t see a thing, whose ears are open but don’t understand a word, who avoid making an about-face and getting forgiven.”

Now Jesus is talking with his disciples and friends here, and it seems amazing to me, with all the time they spent together, all the stories he told, and all the experiences they shared, that those folks still didn’t seem to get it. Had I been Jesus, I think I would have been pretty frustrated at having spent all that time and energy, and still have those closest to me not seeming to understand. Again and again, we find him saying, “Don’t you get it? You have ears, and you still don’t hear?”

It’s as true today as it was in the time of Jesus. One of the classic issues in our relationships is that we seem to be unable to communicate effectively, and we don’t seem to hear and understand what’s being communicated to us. We talk about the necessity of good communication all the time, and there are tons of books and seminars out there to help us, but it continues to be a big stumbling block at home, at work, in most of our relationships. I would bet that, for most of the folks who talk with me about struggles they’re having in their relationships, the problem almost always boils down to the inability to communicate effectively.

Why is something so basic so very difficult for us? There are a number of reasons, but I think that part of the issue is that it’s a really hard thing to do. It takes time and work and energy and attention, and most of us don’t devote that much to it, because we’re more interested and intent on what we’re going to say or do than we are on what the other person is saying.

For many of us, it really *is* all about us, and not about the other. I read somewhere that there are things that tend to get in the way of good communication between us. One is our need to control; another is the judgmental or critical attitude that some of us may have toward others, and yet another is the need that some of us have to be right always. We have problems admitting we’re wrong; we insist on bringing up the other’s past failures and mistakes; we attack or exaggerate our complaints; we erupt in anger that is hurtful and vicious. All of those things become a detriment to good relationships and quality communication.

There are other things that contribute, too. I’m certain that part of the breakdown in communication is due to the complexity of our lives. We’re often going a hundred miles an hour in opposite direction, and seem to have little time to invest in communicating. We rely on shortcuts, and as helpful and common as electronic communication can be, I’m beginning to believe that it’s not the greatest way to communicate.

Another part of the problem has to do with the complexity of language itself. I read somewhere that there are some 800,000 words in the English language, but we only about 800 of them on a daily basis. However, those 800 have about 14,000 different meanings, or an average of 17 meanings per word! Can you imagine our attempts to define what each word means in order to convey what we're trying to say?

And then there are things like slang and jargon and in-talk that confuse many of us and exclude the possibility of our having any clue as to what's going on. For instance, try calling the help line about a computer problem. Most of the time, there's no way I have can even begin to comprehend what the helper is telling. That's why I'm so thankful to have a tech person in our family. Our daughter always comes to the rescue—that goodness!

The same thing occurs when a doctor is giving a diagnosis, or when we're dealing with someone in the legal field. I suppose we have some similar kinds of thing in the church when we use some of the churchy words to the point that no one really understands what we're talking about. The classic example of "churchese" is a sermon title like: "**The Pericopes of Jesus in Relationship to the Eschatology of the Apostle Paul.**" Got it?

And we need to realize that there's much more to communication than just the words themselves. There's our body language, our facial expressions, the tone of voice we use, the look in our eyes, and much, much more. All that plays a role in how effectively we communicate, or fail to.

Well, what can you and I do to be better about this whole communication thing? One of the first things we have to do is to realize just how vital good communication is for good relationships, and then we have to be willing to invest the time, energy and effort it takes to do our part to contribute to positive communication. After all, the root word "communication" comes from the Latin word *communico*, which means, "to share." That's what we're doing when we communicate—we're sharing with one another, and hopefully, we're able to share the depths of our hearts and souls with those closest to us.

To be able to share effectively means that we have to be attentive to two important facets of communication—speaking and listening. Communication is two –way; it implies a dialog, not a monologue. We can't do all the talking, and we can't do all the listening. Sharing has to be with two or more.

Dwight Small (pastor) once said, "**Dialogue takes place when two people communicate the full meaning of their lives to one another, when they participate in each other's lives in the most meaningful ways in which they are capable.**" That's what many of us want and strive for, all the while realizing that no relationship gives everyone everything they want. We have to be realistic about what is a reasonable expectation of our life partner, our co-workers, our family, and our friends.

It seems to me that, by far, the most important facet of communication is listening. We aren't very good at that a lot of times. In fact, the story is told about something that happened when Franklin Delano Roosevelt was President, and was hosting a boring White House reception. He decided to try an experiment to find out how much people listened.

As each person came up to him to greet him, he smiled at the person and said, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." People automatically responded with comments like, "How lovely," or "Just keep up the good work!" No one listened to him, except one foreign diplomat. When the President said, "I murdered my grandmother this morning, he responded softly, "I'm sure she had it coming to her!"

Most of us need to learn to listen better. Someone has noted that's why we have two ears and one mouth—so we can listen well, or as an anonymous writer once said, "**There's nothing so frustrating as a person who keeps right on talking while I'm trying to interrupt.**"

Sometimes our minds wander, and we don't focus on the other person, but we need to realize what that says to the other person: it says we don't value him or her enough to pay close attention, to listen and to really hear what he or she is sharing. Listening intently is a sure sign of respect and value; it's a sign of the intent of the relationship. As Voltaire said, "**The road to the heart is the ear.**" Listening is what draws us close to one another. It's what most people are yearning for—to be heard, to be listened to, respected, and understood.

The other part of communication is the speaking part, and while many of us do a lot of it, we're not always that good at it. You know that old saying—"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."

A lot of the time, we're not entirely clear and succinct in our communication; we go on too long; we repeat ourselves; we take side trips to other topics; we dominate the conversation. Probably most of us could get by with a lot fewer words, but well-chosen words that convey as clearly as possible what we're trying to say.

It always helps to be as gentle and kind as we can possibly be in what we say, because it will be received better when we are like that. We must be careful of the words we choose, because words can be hurtful and destructive. As Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936, British author, poet) once said, "**Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by humankind.**"

The good news is that words can be powerful tools of love, as well. When our intent is positive and loving, when we speak with a gentle spirit, when we keep the best for everyone uppermost in our hearts and minds, then the likelihood is that our communication breakdowns will be few and hopefully, far between.

Closing:

Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "It is the province of knowledge to speak, and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen." Speaking clearly and lovingly, listening carefully and completely—those are the makings of good communication. Let's give it our best.

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