

Let's Talk

Psalm 133
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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How would you rate yourself, on a scale of 1-10, as a communicator? Here's a related, but different question. How easy is it for you to speak with strangers or to people you don't know very well? What about with the ones you love?

Some of you may remember the 1973 movie *Papillon* starring Steve McQueen and Dustin Hoffman, both convicts in a South American prison. In the most memorable line from that movie, the gruff prison warden tells the inmates, "What we have here is a failure to communicate." Speaking of which, listen to this shocking story reported some time ago in the *Boston Globe* newspaper.

It can never be said that Adele Gaboury's neighbors were less than responsible. When her lawn grew hip-high, they had a local boy mow it down. When her pipes froze and burst, they had the water turned off. When the mail spilled out the front door, they called the police. The only thing they didn't do was check to see if she was alive. She wasn't.

On Monday, police climbed her crumbling brick stoop, broke in the side door of her little blue house and found what they believe to be the 73-year-old woman's skeletal remains sunk in a five-foot-high pile of trash where they had apparently lain for as long as four years.

"It's not a very friendly neighborhood," said Eileen Dugan, 70, once a close friend of Gaboury's, whose house sits less than 20 feet from the dead woman's home. "I'm as much to blame as anyone. She was alone and needed someone to talk to, but I was working two jobs and was sick of her coming over at all hours. Eventually I stopped answering the door."

How well do you know and communicate with those who live in the houses or apartments around you?

It's a fact, the more global we have become, the less we, as a society, tend to actually communicate with others on a personal level. In the 1998 book *The DeVoicing of Society: Why We Don't Talk to Each Other Any More*, Harvard professor and neurolinguist John Locke traces the steady regression of our society from one of community interdependence to complete independence. He concludes with the follow warning:

Increasingly we go it alone, under-exercising evolved faculties for social communication. Sending few messages about ourselves, we get back few reactions from others... Many of us are beginning to develop the symptoms of an undiagnosed social condition, **a kind of functional 'devoicing' brought on by an insufficient diet of intimate talking.**

This theme was echoed in Robert Putnam's 2000 book entitled *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Based on vast new data, Putnam shows how we have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and even our democratic structures. He warns that our stock of social capital - the very fabric of our connections with each other, has plummeted, impoverishing our lives and communities.

Putnam shows how changes in work, family structure, age, suburban life, television, computers, gender roles and other factors have contributed to this decline. Here are a few actual statistics. In the 25-year period between 1975 and 2000 there was a 58% decline in attending club meetings, a 33% decline in family dinners, and a 45% decline in having friends over. Putnam concludes: "Our growing social-capital deficit threatens educational performance, safe neighborhoods, equitable tax collection, democratic responsiveness, everyday honesty, and even our health and happiness."

What's happening is that there is even a noticeable disappearance of what we call small talk. And that's no little matter. I read an article on this topic in a professional preacher's journal I used to get called *Homiletics*. The author writes:

Just a hundred years ago our great-grandparents experienced the kind of small-town rootedness that is rapidly slipping away. They lived with and around the same 1,000 or so people their entire lives. They engaged in commerce, amusement and worship with people they knew and trusted, or perhaps knew not to trust.

They talked *directly* to each other until - Bell introduced the telephone. Now Grandpa could talk to someone in the next county. Or even in another state! He was no longer exclusively dependent upon the community for conversation, goods and services.

Then came Ford's horseless buggy.
 Then Orville and Wilber's aeroplane.
 Then movies.
 Then talkies.
 Then radio.
 Then television.
 Then answering machines.
 Then computers.
 Then fax machines.
 Then call waiting, call forwarding, caller I.D.
 Then the Internet and the Web.
 Then e-mail and voice mail.
 Then take-anywhere cell phones.
 [Now text-messages, Facebook, and Twitter.]

Thus the death of distance - and small talk.

Not too long ago I read another very interesting article about what some consider the **prime contributors to decreased communication between neighbors**. The

first was a redesign of new homes that replaced the detached garage, which was once separated from the house, with an attached garage. People no longer walked down their driveway, with its opportunities to see and visit with neighbors. Now, with a garage door opener, a person could drive straight into the garage and walk directly into the house – sight unseen.

Another house redesign issue followed the advent of air conditioning – the removal of the front porch where people used to sit to catch a cool breeze during the hot summer months, thus allowing them to see and visit with their neighbors doing the same thing. Now people hibernate indoors throughout most of the summer when they are at home.

Slowly but surely, we have started communicating less and less with one another in person. Edward Hallowell, a noted psychiatrist who has been treating patients with anxiety disorders for more than 35 years, warns that **we are in danger of losing what he calls the “human moment.” That’s an authentic psychological encounter that can happen only when two people share the same physical space.** And, he believes, we may be about to discover the destructive power of its absence.

While technology has allowed us to share enormous amounts of information with each other, there’s a major drawback. We’re not really sharing much of ourselves with each other, and the process of relationship building suffers as a result.

Well, as you might suppose, the Bible has something to say about all of this. But perhaps most important to remember is that **people in biblical times lived not in an individualistic society like ours, but in a highly community-oriented culture.** And that, in my opinion, is one of the most important reasons for being an active member in a community of faith!

Psalm 133 begins with the following marvelous statement, **“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred dwell together in unity!”** Usually when I preach from this passage I focus on the topic of unity. But this morning, I’d like for us to reflect for a moment on the phrase, ‘dwell together’. **To dwell with others necessarily implies interaction,** not just passing by one another or ignoring people like they don’t exist.

Though the term ‘kindred’ in that biblical verse referred primarily to one’s own relatives or tribe, I believe that in our age of globalization **we need to recognize that all people on this planet are kin. Many even refer to the ‘kingdom’ of God as the ‘kindom’ of God.** So yes, how good it is indeed when kindred dwell together in unity.

One definition of unity goes something like this: “the quality or character of an entire group made up of intimately associated individuals.” The dilemma becomes: **How can people, and how can organizations, including the church, be ‘intimately associated’ if we don’t barely even interact with one another?**

Perhaps, then, a seemingly small and non-threatening way we can move toward being more intimately associated with one another is by at least engaging in small talk. Perhaps we will find that **small talk is actually the beginning of something big,** something meaningful. The author of that article in *Homiletics* provides some guidance:

As you know, small talk needs no specific topic. It exists not for the sake of saying something particular but for connecting us with others. In that sense, it may be small, but it is not trivial. In fact, it is vitally important, not because of what it says, but because of what it does. It’s part of the cement that bonds people to each other.

But casual and polite banter about weather, sports, family, and current events is often seen as unimportant, a waste of time, or as a shallow obstacle to real depth. The faster, it is thought, that we dispense with formalities, the faster true relationship can begin. But ironically, experts claim that just the opposite is true. We need formalities. Truly deep relationships need the kind of fertilization that time and small talk provides.

Something tells me that this congregation already inherently knows that. Most of us are deeply aware of the importance of just being able to “hang out” with each other. Over the past 3 years, however, many of us have witnessed how much better our Hispanic members are at doing that. **We Anglos, for the most part, are so much more agenda-oriented, so much more tied to the ticking of the clock, whether we really need to be somewhere else or not.**

Therefore, I encourage all of us to make an extra-special effort in the months ahead to get the most out of the relationship building opportunities made possible during the times when we gather together as the College Hill family of faith. And there are lots of opportunities, including fellowship time each Sunday at 10:30 am before worship, or spending even a few moments after the service for conversation with others.

Speaking of which, I've come to the realization that I have to be more intentional about that myself. So I had a discussion with the Elders on the Session this past Tuesday about how attending ministry team meetings almost every Sunday after worship keeps me from being able to have personal conversations with lots of folks on Sunday mornings – a crucial part of any pastor's ministry. I basically asked permission that unless really needed I wouldn't be attending their meetings so that I could spend more quality time tending to my pastoral responsibilities. Those on the Session very kindly agreed – though I'm not sure if it was because of recognizing my need to communicate more with others after worship, or if I was indeed not really needed. We'll talk about that next month.

I want to close with another quote. This is from my favorite author on spirituality, Henri Nouwen. He writes:

Casual conversation is a way of acquainting people with the details of our lives. Newcomers to a community can navigate its unfamiliar ways, guided by the small talk of neighbors. **The shared conversations allow us to take steps toward intimacy** - and our prayers allow us to find new ways to become intimate not only with God, but with those in our Christian community.

So yes, how very good and pleasant it is indeed when we talk with one another, thus building relationships, and further enabling us to dwell together in unity!

Amen.