

It's Time to Talk

Psalm 133
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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How often and how well do you communicate with others – those with whom you work, those who live in your neighborhood, those whom you call friends, those in your own family? Communication skills, or lack thereof, can be affected by any number of factors, including one's personality type.

A disturbing trend over the past century bears witness to the fact that the more globally-connected we have become, the less we, as a society, tend to actually communicate with others on an in-person 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 nearly complete independence. Even though his work came before the widespread use of Facebook, smart phones and text messaging, Locke concludes with the following 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, which I'm sure have only increased since this study.

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 occurring 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 Grandma and Grandpa could talk to someone in the next county. Or even in another state! They were 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. Just look at all the detached garages in our church's 1920s neighborhood compared with where you live. People no longer walked down their driveway, with its opportunities to see and visit with neighbors. Now, with a garage door opener, a person can 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, except for yard work, people basically hibernate indoors throughout most of the summer when they are at home. Or, they hang out in the back yard that's fenced off from neighbors. There are also additional safety concerns not as prevalent a couple of generations ago.

Slowly but surely, **we have started communicating less and less with one another in person**. But for many younger people, this is all they have known. 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, Hallowell believes, we may be about to discover the destructive power of its absence.

Have we not all experienced how much easier it is to discount and dismiss others with whom we disagree compared with visiting with them in person? Now we just 'unfriend' them on Facebook. **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 and independent society like ours. Rather, they lived in a highly community-oriented culture. Therefore, belonging to a caring community is one of the most important reasons for becoming involved in a community of faith. Instead, people are leaving organized religion in droves (albeit for some mighty good reasons). But where, I wonder, are they experiencing the benefits of authentic community?

Our Old Testament passage from Psalm 133 begins with the following marvelous statement, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" Usually when I preach from this passage I focus on the important topic of finding unity within community. But this morning, I'd like for us to reflect for a moment on the phrase, 'live together'. The Hebrew words used here are actually better translated 'dwell together.' In the Old Testament "dwell" literally means, "to sit down" with, or even "to settle down" with. That carries a connotation in 21st century English that is stronger than simply "to live with."

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. That's why I get so upset by politicians, and some religious leaders, that keep trying to divide and separate people back into 'tribes'. That's necessary, of course, in order to discriminate. Like several folks here in this sanctuary today, many now refer to the 'kingdom' of God as the 'kin-dom' 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 let's face it, casual and polite formalities and banter about weather, sports, family, and current events is often seen as unimportant, a waste of time, or as a shallow obstacle to a meaningful in-depth conversation. 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 and casual banter. **Truly deep relationships need the kind of fertilization that time and small talk provides.** Therefore, I encourage all of us to make an extra-special effort in the weeks and months ahead to make the most out of the relationship building opportunities made possible during the times when we gather together as the College Hill community of faith.

I want to close with another quote. This is from one of my favorite authors 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 – in person – thus building and strengthening relationships, and further enabling us to *dwell* together in unity! It's time to talk!

Amen.