

Are You Listening to Me?

When I can't think straight or I need to get away for a minute, I love to go outside. I take a deep breath and relax any tension. I smell the earth, rain (if it has recently fallen), and the flowers. Then, I listen. I hear the manmade noises first: cars, airplanes, lawnmowers, children playing. But as I quiet my soul, I begin to hear nature around me: birds, crickets, cicadas, and the wind. When the breeze brushes against my face and blows my hair, I inhale deeply and release all the tension inside of me. The breeze is like a caress from God. It never ceases to amaze me how renewed I feel when I connect with God through the actions of the Holy Spirit in nature. Today we are going to talk about communication with God, our families, and all those around us.

As we listen to this passage, we hear how the disciples were renewed- given a direction and purpose to keep going on. They were filled with God and couldn't do anything but speak about God's love through the actions of Jesus the Christ. Today, we thrive on newness, don't we? We like shiny new cars, new clothes, new furniture. It makes us feel good to see how clean and fresh those things are. I think that we are that way in our relationships, too. We love the newness of love- the fluttering in our stomach and anticipation of the next time we will see that special someone. It feels good to know someone is as excited about us as we are about them!

Within that newness comes communication. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement, talked about how a new believer is hungry for all things about God. They spend time in prayer, Bible study, talking to other believers, and worshiping God. They want to know more- experience more. Everything is about getting better acquainted with God. And our relationships are much the same. In the newness of relationships, we communicate over dinner, on walks, on the phone. We ask the other person "How was your day?" and we truly listen to everything they have to say. As the relationship turns to marriage and children come along, we revel in the new tiny life that has been entrusted to our care. I could stare at my boys for hours when they were newborns. Each face or movement they made was celebrated. We love newness and we are so attentive to the other when the relationship is new.

But life happens, doesn't it? And eventually the newness wears off. We are too tired after a long day, too busy to talk and share. In the midst of this, communication breaks down and life continues to propel us forward. Maybe our job changes and requires that we spend long and tedious hours away from home, or perhaps we lose our job and with it our sense of purpose and identity. Our kids grow up and begin to demand more of our energy as we drive them to activities and we struggle to remember how fun it was just to stare at them. Somewhere along the way, we stop communicating and as we do, we begin to feel as if the other just doesn't care. And, if life gets really ugly, as it oftentimes does, we can even begin to feel as if God doesn't really care.

This communication breakdown is kind of like a sailboat out at sea. Have you ever been sailing? I love the feeling of being out on the water. When the wind catches the sail and you trim it just so, the boat lists to one side and off you go skipping over the water! It's exhilarating to feel the wind and know that you have harnessed some of God's power to make the boat go so fast! However, sometimes the wind dies down to nothing. Last year, my sons and I went out on the Chesapeake Bay with my aunt and uncle. There was no wind at all. We had been so excited about being out on the water and here we were with no wind to propel us along. We

just sat in the middle of the bay with the sail sagging limply off the mast. It's so silent out on the water. Almost eerie how isolated you can feel even if you can see other boats around you.

When we allow life to stop the communication with others, we can feel this isolation. We may be surrounded by people, but we feel utterly alone. We stop listening to each other and begin to live separate lives. We become frustrated when the other doesn't "get" us and sometimes even begin to think it would be easier without the other person there.

A documentary was filmed about a high school several years ago that I saw in seminary. I was appalled by the conversation of several of the families. They were talking about evening rituals. The parents and youth talked about how in the evenings when the parents came home, the children would all be in their rooms. The parents would fix dinner and leave it on the counter—oftentimes not even communicating with the rest of the family during this whole time. Each member of the family would come down as they were hungry and take their plate back to their rooms to eat while they watched their separate tv's or listened to music or did homework. There was absolutely no time of connecting as a whole family. If communication had to take place, it was done with both sides shouting at the other and neither listening to what the other side had to say.

Communication breakdown is deadly for the marriage, as well. We allow those little things to bottle up inside of us and we don't even know how to talk to this person that we vowed to love and to cherish. A couple of weeks ago, Randy talked to us about how we are different as men and women. Men are goal-oriented, he told us. Women are emotion-oriented. It's good that we're different, really. It allows us to use our differences to make our families stronger. But too often, we forget to really listen to the other side.

In our relationship with our spouse, it is also important to take the time to talk and not become strangers or tugged into unproductive arguments. One Sunday a minister was finishing up a series on marriage. At the end of the service he was giving out small wooden crosses to each married couple. He said, "Place this cross in the room in which you fight the most and you will be reminded of God's commands and you won't argue as much." One woman came up after the service and said, "You'd better give me five." We really struggle sometimes to communicate with one another, don't we?

The same happens with God. When we allow the busyness of life to take over our time with God, our relationship suffers. We become easily frustrated, stressed out and anxious about all aspects of our lives. And sometimes we wonder where God is in the midst of our stress. However, God is never the one who has walked away from the relationship. We are the ones who stop communicating with God.

So, how do we fix this break down in communication? How do we reconnect with our family members and become the strong family that God wants us to be?

First, you pray. Take time to pray with God alone first. When your patience is at an end, pray. When you become angry, pray. When you feel like no one is listening to what you are saying, pray. Allow any negative feelings you have to go to God first. And if your family is receptive, pray together. Jesus says in Matthew 18:20, "when two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Invite God into the conversations with your loved ones. Let God guide

the conversation instead of your tongue. James 3:5-6 says How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.” And in verse 10 James continues, “From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.” Let God have control over this extremely volatile member of your body. How quickly we can turn from gentle, kind and considerate to angry, hostile and loud. And how we regret those words once they have left our lips! Even an apology never fully dismisses the harm that is generated by our hurtful words. When you feel your control slipping, pray to God and allow God to be the generator of your words rather than your angry retorts.

Second, remember the newness. Instead of finding all the things that bother you about your spouse, your children or your parents, take time together to remember what you love about them. Look at old pictures together, recall special memories or times that you felt especially close. We can't live in the past, but by recalling what we love about each other, we can build once again upon the foundation that has been laid. In remembering the things you love about each other, try to build new memories off of the old. When we focus first on God and then begin to build upon an existing relationship, we allow God to transform our lives. II Corinthians 5:17 states, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!” My husband and I had very little money when we got married. Our honeymoon was spent camping in the Shenandoah Mountains for a week. It was the most wonderful trip! For our ten year anniversary, we went back to the same trails we visited ten years before. It was so amazing to see how things had changed and how they had stayed the same. We created some wonderful new memories to build on the old. And today, May 23rd, marks the eighteenth anniversary of our Reaffirmation of Vows. By remembering our past and building on it, we are reminded of all the things that we love about each other and we strengthen that foundation that began eighteen years ago.

This relationship is also one with God. It is easy to grow stagnant in our faith. Maybe we do our devotionals every morning and pray throughout the day, but it becomes rote and stale. Lamentations 3:22-23 says, “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” God's love is fresh every day if we just open ourselves to God and are receptive to God's power and love in our lives.

Third, stop talking and start listening. Psalm 130 starts out saying, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!” We long to have someone listen to our deepest pain and not to ridicule us but to truly hear us. Friends, we all want to be heard and understood; accepted, respected and loved for who we are and how we feel about things. We need to want this for our loved ones as much as we want it for ourselves. When we do, we begin to listen more attentively than we argue our case. Psalm 131 goes on to say, “O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high... I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.” When we pray and ask God to be with us and then we recall what we love about the persons in our lives, it becomes easier to stop trying to get our point across and instead to hear the other person. You may say that you are listening and it's your spouse or your children or your parents who aren't listening. But I'll bet you anything it's a little bit of everyone not hearing anyone else. We are good at listening with our ears when we feel that we are in the right, but we are not so good at listening with our hearts. Will Rogers, a

famous speaker from the early 1900's, talked about his Cherokee roots. He said that an Indian never judges a man until he has walked around him and seen the world as that man is seeing the world from all sides. In summing up what this did for him, Will Rogers stated that he had never met a man he didn't like. After looking at a problem or difficulty from the other person's perspective, he could relate to their way of thinking and at least appreciate who they were. We need to do this as well. As angry as we become, we need to stop for just a minute and put ourselves in the other person's shoes. They may be seeing a situation with different eyes and once you look at the situation the way they do, then perhaps you can think of different solutions and compromises to build a stronger relationship together.

Very recently, the movie Avatar came out on DVD. Basically, the plot of the movie is about how a private company and the military on Earth are looking for a new home because Earth is destroyed by our treatment of her. They find the perfect place to settle, but there are already inhabitants in the area. At first, they bring in people to learn the ways of the inhabitants and try to convince them to leave their homes. But as the small core of folks who are out there with the inhabitants learn their ways and see why they need to stay where they are- the whole land is connected together- creatures and nature and moving would destroy them all- the private company decides that they don't really care why the inhabitants aren't moving; they just want them moved. They began the conversation, but really didn't care what the other side had to say. They just wanted the land for themselves regardless of the consequences to the inhabitants.

Do you find that your conversations become this way, as well? You begin communicating, but you aren't willing to walk around and see the other person's point of view? Friends, as hurt as you may be, as many words as have been spoken but not heard, is it time to stop talking and start truly listening? This is not always an easy step. So many hurtful words layered on top of each other make it nearly impossible to break through the hurt on both sides to allow healing to take place. If this is the case, you might want to consider going for counseling to help open up the conversation. It's hard to admit when we can't do it ourselves, but if we are truly committed to the other person, is it not worth the support and knowledge that comes from a good counselor to help break down the walls that are separating you from the one you love? It's hard work, friends, but it's worth it when you are both dedicated to making the relationship last. Looking back on the hard years and how you worked through them, listened, built trust, respected each other, and continued to communicate and compromise can oftentimes make us stronger.

As a parent, I strive to keep this communication break down from happening. I have the joy of taking both boys to school in the morning. Even though the ride isn't long, we talk. We talk about their classes, the things they are struggling with, the books they are reading, their friends, whatever they want to talk about. In the evenings, even though I am not always home for dinner, we make a point to have Friday night as our family night. We eat pizza and watch a movie. On weeks when I am away a lot, I will sometimes even do something that is not my favorite thing in the world, but that I know allows me time with the boys. I'll play on the Wii with them. These moments stolen out of our busy schedule are very important to me and I think to my family as well. It forces us to move away from our isolation and into relationship with each other. It encourages us to talk and gives us common ground. It reminds us that spending time together is so important to our life as a family.

The last thing that can help fix the break down in communication is very similar to the first, but goes deeper. That is to make time for God and for the other person. Acts reminds us of the newness and refreshing power of God. But relationships take time. This is true with other people and it is true for God. Jesus sets this example for us very clearly as the Bible mentions how often Jesus went off to pray by himself. I Thessalonians 5:16-18 says to “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Spend time in the morning praying and reading a devotional to focus you for the day. In the evening, spend time thanking God for all the ways God was present during your day. This keeps your relationship with God fresh and new and gives you new focus for all your other relationships.

The same goes for your loved ones. When our boys were younger, Norm’s and my time together was after they went to bed. We always took time to ask, “How was your day? What exciting things happened? What frustrated you? How are you going to tackle tomorrow?” Now is a little more difficult, but we make the time to be together every single day. Sometimes it’s as simple as a conversation on the phone as we both drive home from work. Other times, it is at the dinner table or even while we prepare the meal together. Families are much like teams. If even one person is not doing their part within the family, it makes it very hard to score a goal or touchdown or run or whatever sport analogy you want to put in there! But when the team is working well and everyone is playing their positions and talking to each other out there on the field, we all win.

Friends, we need to remember that we serve a Living God and this Living God is the God of Living Relationships. This is with God, with our families, with our friends, even with strangers or people we don’t particularly like. On Pentecost, we are reminded of a day that happened long ago. The Holy Spirit swept down among the disciples and filled them with God’s power. It is important to maintain our relationship with God so that Pentecost is not just another day from the past that some celebrate and many do not even know what means. We need instead to live into our Pentecostal roots and communicate with God to keep the Living Lord alive in our personal lives.

The well known author and preacher Fred Craddock tells a compelling story about a lecture he was giving: a few years ago, when he was on the west coast speaking at a seminary, just before the first lecture, one of the students stood up and said, “Before you speak, I need to know if you are Pentecostal.” The room grew silent. Craddock said he looked around for the Dean of the seminary. He was no where to be found. The student continued with his quiz right in front of everybody. Craddock was taken aback, and so he said, “Do you mean do I belong to the Pentecostal Church?” He said, “No, I mean are you Pentecostal?” Craddock said, “Are you asking me if I am charismatic?” The student said, “I am asking you if you are Pentecostal.” Craddock said, “Do you want to know if I speak in tongues?” He said, “I want to know if you are Pentecostal.” Craddock said, “I don’t know what your question is.” The student said, “Obviously, you are not Pentecostal.” And he left.

Pentecost is a day. Pentecostal is allowing God to actively participate in our lives. Friends, we serve a living Lord, an active and present God. God is not only real, but God sent Jesus Christ, God incarnate or made flesh, to us here on earth so we could see him and touch him and know him. When Jesus was taken up into heaven, God sent the Holy Spirit to breathe into each one of us and remind us of God’s presence each and every day. But that presence will

seem distant and cold if we do not take time to communicate daily with God, just as our relationships need to be nurtured and tended in order to thrive.

Today on Pentecost, I ask you. Is Pentecost just an event that happened two thousand years ago that we remember as the birthday of the church? Or is it a reminder that we are a Pentecostal church, and God is present here and now breathing new life into each of us and reminding us that when we communicate with God and with our loved ones, we are promised a rich and fulfilling life surrounded by love, grace, peace, joy, and contentment? Do you take time each day to listen to God speaking to you and guiding your life? Take time every day to nurture those relationships in your life that honor being a Pentecostal people- both with God, in your families, and with everyone you meet.