

“How to Talk to Your Wife”
Ephesians 5:25-32
May 8, 2016, Mother’s Day
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I read several years ago that a school board in a faraway place from Athens decided to cancel Mother’s Day in that district. There was to be no mention or celebration of the holiday of any kind. They were serious. They decreed that a day for mothers was an old fashioned and outdated holiday. It excluded those women who could not have children or who chose not to have children, as well as all of those whose life style pre-empted the possibility of being parents. The Board said further that the holiday was also an offense to those whose mothers had been abusing, uncaring, and selfish and some who had deserted their children. They added a word or two more that some people’s mothers spent their whole lives trying to make their children feel guilty for leaving the nest and “forsaking” them. They finally complained that the holiday was too tender and emotional for those mothers who had lost children to death. Their school district was not going to allow such an outmoded celebration. I never heard how that turned out.

Now obviously, I do not concur with the action, primarily because I was gifted with a grand and wonderful mother, since duplicated in my own home by the mother of our children. But, as a pastor, I do face each Mother’s Day from the pulpit, knowing that the celebration of the holiday is not as simple as it appears to those who sell cards, flowers, candy and whatever, to honor the sainted person who gave each of us life. Whatever else our differences and perception, all of us had or have a mother.

Now, knowing what I have felt in many previous years of preaching about how the emotional impact of Mother’s Day works its rounded magic for or against God’s children, still I come back again with a Mother’s Day sermon which in title excludes many of the people in the pews. For our sermon I have narrowed the topic down to the question of communication between couples: How a husband should talk to his wife. I begin most of my pre-marriage counseling with couples talking about communication. About 85% of all misunderstandings in any kind of relationship can be traced back to a failure to communicate. I believe learning to communicate clearly is the most important tool we have in interacting with other people whether it be in a marriage or in any other kind of relationship be it at work, at play, in the sports arena or wherever. So, I hope all of you feel you can listen in and apply these principles to your life and relationships.

This being Mother’s Day I selected this narrow aspect with a peculiar origin. One day this topic came up in conversation. Standing with several clergy couples at a retreat I overheard one wife asked another, “Has he ever learned to talk to you?”

“What a question,” I thought. I was about to chip in, when the wife who was asked the question answered, “No, he hasn’t.” I held my tongue and waited to hear, “Well, neither has Matthew.”

Then I remember talking to my mother, thirty years ago in the time before my father died. I said, “How’s it going, Mom?” She said, “I’m, O.K., but I’m lonely. Your father doesn’t talk to me much anymore.” Now, I tell you this not to demean my father but it is a personal way to introduce our topic. Maybe Dad and I, and all the other husbands and fathers that I have ever known, need to learn to talk to their wives and learn the lesson intended by our Mother’s Day sermon.

I hear it in my office when couples come to see me in hopes of patching up their marriage. It is almost like a broken record. “He’s busy doing this or that,” she said. “He works all day and sleeps all night and watches T.V. in between ... or he plays golf ... or boats ... or drinks....” He says, “I get along just fine everywhere else in the world, so why can’t I talk to my wife?”

I read a survey which I trust is accurate. There are 10,080 minutes in a week. The survey questioned married couples to ask how many minutes each week they talked to each other, face-to-face. The answer was “eighteen” minutes a week, the total time spent talking to each other! Webster defines “talk” as “the expression or exchange of ideas by means of opening the mouth and speaking words.” Did you hear that? “The opening of the mouth and speaking words.”

So listen—grunts do not count, bears and pigs grunt; husbands are supposed to talk. Yelling does not count; yodelers and hog callers yell, but husbands and friends are supposed to talk. “Commercial-Political commentary,” as one wife calls it, does not count. News-commentators comment on politics, husbands are supposed to talk. Polite words out in public do not count. Maitre’ds are polite in public; husbands are supposed to talk. Mumbles do not count. Mumbles are fine when you are trying to deceive someone into thinking that you know their name, but husbands are supposed to talk.

If it is true in many cases anyway, that husbands do not talk to their wives, then the thoughtful people listening should be asking, “Why?” Why doesn’t he talk, I mean really talk to share his feelings and hopes with me?

Well, I **think one reason** husbands do not talk to their wives is that men, in my generation anyway, were not trained to talk. We were trained to work, to excel, to be tough, to be smart, to take charge of things. We were trained to be a protector. I didn’t choose to be trained that way; that’s the way it was. In my work, I was trained to “speak,” not talk. We were trained that our job was to make a living, bring the bread and butter home, keep the wolf away from the door and learn the skill of manipulating things so that they would work to the advantage of our families. I was trained that way. I was not trained to sit and talk.

With successful people, it is even worse. There’s no question that I’m the boss at work; and of those couples I mentioned earlier the husband I mentioned is quite successful, is the boss as well. There everyone listens to him, or pretends to; not because he’s wise but because he is the boss. Then this big shot goes home, and suddenly he is not the boss anymore! He is just, hopefully, another person in a marriage and a family. He can’t use the skills he used elsewhere. Frank Harrington told the story about how his wife reminded him one day to take out the trash. He said, “Honey, don’t you know who I am? Pastor of the largest Presbyterian Church in the country.” She said, “You might be that down at the church but here you are my trash man.”

Second, I think husbands do not talk to their wives because they are afraid of them. They, the husbands, are afraid of them, the wives. I think there is a reason why. Nietzsche once complained, "God looks with eyes that see everything and no one wants to be known that much." Wives see the husband in all the foibles of his life.

In the early years of marriage I often see it happen: the husband tries to share, but then she comes to see his weaknesses. None of us want our weaknesses known. We are trained to believe that we will be rejected when others see it and somehow think of us worth less than we are. She has seen him acting like a child; she has seen him being foolish; she has seen the petty ways that he is dominated by his selfishness. She listens to his exaggerated patter. No one else (at least almost no one else) has ever seen these things in him. And he is afraid, afraid to share because she might know more. He never knows for sure what is going on inside of her. Most husbands assume they know what their wives are thinking. They usually do not. If others have to listen to him, or choose to, she doesn't. Wives need to be careful.

For example: I had a minister friend once who preached a sermon that he thought was quite good. His wife said to me five years later, "He came to me that day and asked, 'How was my sermon, Honey?' She said, 'I told him ... (Her comments were kind but not ALL positive) And you know,' she said, 'He has never asked me again. Not once.'"

Having acknowledged that husbands ought to share themselves, having touched upon the hidden fear, there is **one last thing I want** to say. Talking to your wife or to the woman that you love is a command from God. Speak kindly to her, always. She has a difficult job to do, whether she is tied up with little children, or housework, or her own career, or worrying, running after you, or helping you with your retirement, or even helping you with the problems of old age.

Whatever it is? It is not easy to be a wife or mother, and it is not getting any easier for the younger generation. All they have to do is add their work-lives onto everything I have said. It is getting harder, in my opinion, for a woman to thrive and blossom and flourish, to grow and to relax.

My goodness men, we are dumb! The happiness of women should be the chief end of everything we do. St. Paul wrote, "Love is patient and kind." Jeremiah told his friends to be kind to the brides of their youth. Talk to her. Help her make it through the days and nights. And why? Well, she will be lonely if you don't. If you don't talk to her, someone else will. I don't mean a great affair necessarily. I just mean we all need to talk to someone.

He came to see me one day. He said his marriage was over. I had married them twelve years previously, had baptized their two girls, watched both of them blossom in the church and in their own careers. She was an executive with a telephone company and he was a builder of homes all over the place. He said it was like the commercial on T.V. where the 2 cars arrive at home at just about the same time. They slam the car doors and head inside for the bar! Speaking nary a word to each other. "She has found someone else who talks to and listens to her and she doesn't need me anymore," he said. Well, fortunately for them, things had not gone too far and their love for each other and their children held them together and four months later we did a re-dedication of

their marriage vows. He told me later, “I learned a great life lesson there. I learned I needed to really talk to her. I almost lost my best friend.”

Our scripture lesson from Ephesians 5 gets bad press because it is the place where Paul wrote, “wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife just as Christ is head of the church.” Now I know that is not a particular popular paragraph in Paul’s writing. But the next paragraph states: “Husbands, love your wives as you love your own body.” It is curious the way that Paul said it. What he means, I think, is that as you love yourself, whether it be the muscles of your body, the success of your company, the ability to preach within a pulpit, the golf swing which keeps the elbow in, all of your pet projects, the tennis strokes from the baseline, the boating that you do, the fishing, hunting, running, the community experience all that you do, etc.

The way you love yourself and the image that you have of who you are. At that level of intensity, you should love your wife. The Bible says that you must love her as you love you, just as strongly and surely. Husbands love your wives as Christ first loved the church and gave his all and everything that She might live. For now and evermore, in Jesus Christ our Lord.