

*Holy Relations: The Language of Love*  
*Song of Solomon 7: 1-9, Colossians 3: 12-17*  
*February 4, 2007*

Today we are going to explore love communications. I want to start first by dealing with two miscommunications that you have brought to my attention in my last two sermons. First for those who are not as geometrically challenged as me you may have noticed three weeks ago that I mistakenly referred to a “love” triangle that had equal length sides and equal angles as an isosceles triangle. Of course that was an equilateral triangle. Last week in my closing prayer I may have miscommunicated in my sermon regarding my theology around living in singleness versus living in a married state. They are valued equally in the eyes of God. Singleness is not necessarily a prelude to becoming married. The living example of Jesus Christ and the words of the Apostle Paul communicate that reality quite clearly. Each week I confess that I step into this pulpit with much fear and trembling. A prophetic office that calls for speaking on behalf of God is a risky one. It is one that requires a precision in language because of language’s nuances and the many opportunities for miscommunication. Intimate, one-on-one communication carries the greatest risks of miscommunication! And that is my topic for today – the language of love.

Steve and Cindy had been dating for a few months. As they were driving home from a romantic dinner and movie there was silence in the car. Cindy’s mind began to race. She wondered what Steve was thinking about her and if he was growing attached to her like she was to him. She didn’t want to pressure him though. She wanted to know his true feelings for her, but she was afraid to scare him off. Meanwhile Steve is off in his own world thinking about tomorrow’s upcoming Super Bowl. He’s thinking through

all the match ups for the game and what the outcome might be. Cindy interrupts his dreaming as she says, "I really liked that love story in the movie tonight when Jack Nicholson confessed his love for Helen Hunt, in front of that restaurant of people." Steve had not yet switched his mind from tomorrow's Super Bowl, and responded, "Excuse me?" Cindy thought to herself, "You idiot! He thinks you're pressuring him into talking about his true feelings with that reference to the movie tonight." Her mind begins to race as she thinks back through every detail of their dating life together. She remembers how loving and kind he has been to her. She re-analyzes each kiss and loving squeeze of his hand. What is he feeling right now? Steve thinks to himself, "I wonder if the Colts can really win this game tomorrow. Will their offense be able to run the ball against the Bears? And can Manning be patient to pass underneath on the "cover 2" defense he will no doubt see? Cindy thinks, "Oh no, now I've done it. He's giving me the silent treatment. I've pressured him now and he's clamming up on me. I can't believe I said that. How stupid of me. I have to allow him to move at his own speed. I can't expect to be perfect and respond to my every need and emotion. He's my knight in shining armor but even knights fall off their horses every now and then. Steve is thinking, "Manning has just got to put together those long, fifteen play drives and just not turn the ball over. That's the key to us winning that game tomorrow. Finally, Cindy bursts out into tears and says to Steve, "I am so sorry I am putting so much pressure on you. You don't have to stay on that horse of yours all the time. I'll understand." Steve wonders what Cindy is talking about but says nothing. The next day Steve sees his friend, Dan, who is good friends with Cindy. Steve asks Dan, "Dan, did Cindy ever ride horses?"

Communication in a love relationship can be tricky, can't it? I am in the third week of my series on *Holy Relations*, and this week I am focusing on how important intimate communications are to relationships. Why is this so critical to a relationship? Relationship studies show that satisfaction is directly related to effective communications. Real intimacy only comes when each person feels that there are genuinely understood by the other. Effective, intimate conversation provides a wonderful opportunity for bonding and lasting love. In the end the sexiest love organ that we have is our brains.

One of the most popular texts for holy unions comes from the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Colossians, chapter 3, verses 12 through 17. This is a different kind of love language, the love language of encouragement. Paul begins by saying, "you are special, God's chosen people!" You have found favor in God's love. Now, show on the outside what God has placed in your heart: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Show it in your dealings with your sisters and brothers. Forgive each other. Most of all, for your outermost garment, wear love. Let that be what people see first in you. Spread this message and this life. Sing hymns and spiritual songs. (Tell the story of the retreat – "If we find ourselves in conflict, pick up our hymnals and start singing.") I find I cannot be mad at someone when I pray for them and when I sing. Paul's controlling image is that we wear like a kind of layering of clothing the fruits of God's spirit. Words are the coded language with which we often communicate patience, kindness, compassion and love. Our conversation is the process of transmitting and receiving a kind of loving code.

Les and Leslie Parrot in their book, *Love Talk*, share some ways to strengthen the outer and inner clothing of our communications. The Parrots claim that there are three levels of outer conversation: grunt, journalist, and feelings level. The “grunt” level is where we exchange generalities. How are you doing? I’m super! The journalist level is where we exchange the facts about what is going on in our lives. How was your day? I had three meetings, made three sales calls and dealt with two unhappy customers. The deepest level is the feelings level. This is where true, intimate conversation happens. It is where we get to know the inner life of the other person. To the extent that you communicate effectively with your partner you can move effectively to this level. Body language and tone of voice communicate 93% of our message to the receiver. If I cross my arms or scowl when I say, “I need to talk to you,” what does that communicate? If I change my tone of voice to say, “I NEED TO TALK TO YOU,” what does that communicate? But if I reach out with my hands to yours and say, “I need to talk to you,” it communicates something very different. Our love communications are filled with many differing motivations also. Sometimes we seek conversation with our partner to problem solve, because we value their opinion. Much of the time we seek conversation with our partner to process our own feelings. For many, until we process what we are feeling through conversation, we don’t fully experience them. Sometimes we talk just to share and be close to our lover. As listeners, we need to de-code these motivations so that we can respond appropriately. Listening without trying to fix the situation can never get you in trouble.

The Parrots also discuss the idea of understanding your partner’s “fear factor” which is basic to one’s personalities and conversation styles. For some, their fear is

losing control of time. They tend to be rushed and usually are the ones to end the conversation. They often project impatience. Some fear losing approval from loved ones. These people are highly motivated to please and to transmit messages that do not offend. They can be crushed by a discouraging word or a sign of disapproval or indifference. They tend to focus much more on feelings than facts. Thirdly some are motivated by intense loyalty. These people will walk the extra mile for you, in good times and in the worst of times. They are devoted and loyal, but also often stubborn and resistant to change. They “stay the course” of the relationship. Face it, their stubbornness is at the same root as their loyalty! Talk openly about these underlying communications motivations so that you can better understand your partner.

One of the most important communications aspects that affects the success and durability of our love relationships is self-talk. This is the conversation that takes place almost continuously within our heads. The cortexes of our brains are continuously paved like black-top on a superhighway by our self-talk. What does your self talk sound like about your lover? Does your talk say, “what a wonderful man is my lover...he is always caring, always sensitive, always looks so good when we go out in public.” Or does your self-talk sound more like this: “I can’t believe that he is wearing that outfit...he never listens to me...why won’t he do his share of the chores?” Pay attention to your self-talk and consciously program it to be positive and affirming. What we nurture and practice in our hearts, our inner clothing, is what we project in our outer clothing. This is the message of the Apostle in his letter to his beloved, the Colossians.

The “Song of songs” from our Bible can be understood as the best of songs, in other words, the best love language of the Bible. It represents meaning on many levels:

an allegory for God's passionate love for humankind; for Christ's love of the church. It also stands taller than allegory as an affirmation of God's gift of sexuality to human beings. Let me read chapter 7, verses 1 through 9. Chapter seven is a love conversation between two lovers: the first is the love song of the bridegroom for the bride. These are words addressed to the "prince's daughter." It is highly visual as the lover works from the feet up describing in highly figurative language his gaze upon this lovely woman. Metaphor and simile are the means of love-talk. The language is overtly sensual and sexual. I might come up with a better metaphor for the abdomen than a heap of wheat, or something to describe her nose than the tower of Lebanon. Body, breath and voice are all described in sensual terms. This is the highest of love poetry, the language of love.

Gary Smalley and John Trent have written an entire book on this subject of love word pictures. I greatly recommend it to you. Metaphor and simile have incredible power to communicate emotions and ideas. When I proposed marriage to Katie on Valentine's Day thirteen years ago I used verses from James Joyce's poetry to communicate my love to her. In the days leading up to my proposal I left anonymous couplets and quatrains from Joyce at her door and in her mailbox from a secret admirer. It was not me who proposed that night but I had the power of James Joyce, a fellow Irishman, behind me. I guess it worked. But you can write your own love poetry. Get in touch with the figurative language that connects to the heart of your lover. If he cooks, use language with lots of cooking and food imagery in it. If she enjoys the beauty of the outdoors, use love language that compares your lover to the wonders of the outdoors. You can use this language both to deliver messages of joy and pain. And it has so much more impact when you do.

Valentine's Day is coming again soon. I have a proposal for you that are in partnered relationships. Beyond a nice dinner, a lovely Hallmark card and a box of chocolates, try on a few of these ideas for size. Try a new thing this Valentine's Day. Here are just a few suggestions:

1. Write a poem. It doesn't have to rhyme.
2. Send a love letter listing the reasons "Why I love you so much."
3. Plan a surprise lunch, complete with picnic basket, sparkling grape juice and goblets.
4. Kidnap the car for a thorough washing and detailing.
5. Arrange for someone to sing a favorite love song to you and your love when you're together.
6. Hide little love notes in the car, a coat pocket, or desk. Or leave an affirming voicemail for your lover on a stressful day.
7. Write the story of the growth of your relationship from your perspective, sharing your emotions and your joys. What a treasure!
8. Change a habit that your love has been wanting you to change.

You know that of all the images we have for God our most enduring is the "Word of God." God literally *spoke* creation into existence. We also know our savior as the "Word made flesh." Language has both creative and destructive possibilities. My prayer is that in all your love relationships you use language to build up and not to tear down, that you practice the language of love.