

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
May 12 & 13, 2012  
Rich Phenow  
You & Me: Communication  
Ephesians 4:25-32**

Let's pray together.

Gracious and Holy God, I pray that You would be in my mind and on my lips, that You would speak through my heart, not my words but Your words. Be glorified, Lord. In Your Name I pray. Amen.

As many of you know, we have been in a sermon series for the last few weeks entitled You & Me: Building Healthy Relationship. So far during the series, we have covered the values of forgiveness, Heather and John did such a great job at that; we looked at boundaries; we looked at the power of prayer in relationship; and last week when we had our confirmands, our eighth graders, stand up here and be recognized, Lee talked about submission. Submission is bowing ourselves and leaning into the will of God for our lives and submitting to His authority and His design. This week I will be talking about the value of communication, how it helps to deepen and grow our relationship.

It often seems that when we are asked to preach on a certain topic, for a few weeks before, a lot of illustrations come to light that bring support to the message. I think the reason is to cause us to question our own application of the sermon. We as pastors have this heightened sense of awareness that it is not just about your issues but about our issues as well, and are we really living up to what we are asking you to live up to? In some ways for me, it is kind of like, if you have ever done any wallpapering or finish carpentry or painting or any ceramic tiling, what happens is, you become a self-proclaimed professional. You walk into people's homes and you begin to analyze the work in their house.

You look at the mitered corner cuts and go, "Oh, man! Is that guy bad or what?" You look at the wallpaper pattern and realize that the pattern isn't repeated in the corner, and you think, "Holy buckets! What was that guy's problem?" Then you make these broad, sweeping determinations like, "This guy must not have been awake! I mean, look at the brush marks in that wood and those grout lines! Those things are horrible! I mean, they are so crooked, I can't believe it." A couple of times I thought to myself, "This guy should either hire a professional or he should get a Home Depot how-to book and this time, read the thing."

Is that just me, or have you ever done that? C'mon. Let's be honest with each other. Get your hands up. Let's see them. Steve, get your hand up. I know you have done that. Listen, I know I am not the only sinner in our midst. You see, I believe it is a little bit like preaching. Suddenly you begin to look at the corners of your own life, and you begin to look at the crooked grout lines in your own soul. That is what happens when we preach.

It happened to me on Tuesday. Jody and I were on a road trip down to Rochester for a meeting. We got engaged in this great conversation and, man, I was doing my best listening. I was really present to her. Internally I'm thinking the conversation would make a great illustration for this sermon, and so there I was. I was into it. I was reflecting back, you feel this way and you think this, and internally, I'm going, "Wow! You are amazing!" And I was going to take that turn to Rochester but I was so engaged in the conversation, I went to St. Paul instead. After going about 40 miles out of the way, I had to admit my mistake and take responsibility and own my over-focused listening. It was about me acknowledging that it wasn't Jody's fault I was listening so well. It was my fault, and I was able to say, "I messed up! I screwed up!"

Let's tie some of these thoughts into the reality of our Scripture for today as we look at it together. Open your pew Bibles to page 1,745 of the New Testament, Paul's Letter to the church in Ephesus, chapter 4, verse 25 through the first verse of chapter 5. Hear the Word of God. I would encourage you to take out pencils or pens and write in the margins and interact with this text. This is what Paul says.

<sup>25</sup> Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. <sup>26</sup> "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, <sup>27</sup> and do not give the devil a foothold. <sup>28</sup> He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.

<sup>29</sup> Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. <sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

<sup>31</sup> Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Then this next verse is the foundation for my sermon.

<sup>1</sup> Be imitators of God....

Keep your Bible open. That last verse is essential for us to understand today's message. We are to be imitators of God. Just as children mimic and imitate their parents, we should model ourselves after God. Essentially, what Paul is saying is, we need to look more and more like Christ, especially when we communicate in order for us to build healthy relationships. I want to give you a simple tool on how to do that, the acronym of LOVE, based on some of the insights from this text. Let's talk a little bit about that as a way to get our feet moving on the road to healthier relationship.

The letter "L" stands for listening. This is what James says in chapter 1 of his Letter,

<sup>19</sup> My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak....

I think that is probably the opposite of how it is for most of us. We are so quick to speak and slow to listen. The Wisdom writer of Proverbs 18:13 says this,

<sup>13</sup> He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame.

You want to be a better communicator? Then open your ears and close your mouth and listen. We have to refrain from listening with just half an ear. Listening with just half an ear is multi-tasking. It is cooking, it is driving, it is reading the paper while we are pretending to listen. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom I quoted on the front of our bulletin today, said this which hurts me even more. This is what he says, “Especially ministers so often think they must contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the service they have to render. They forget that listening is a greater service than speaking.”

Clergy! We are the greatest offenders! We think it is about wisdom, and we think it is about our insight, but Bonhoeffer says it is simply about our ability to serve others by listening to them. Especially ministers. We are the worst offenders. We always have something to say. You want to serve somebody? Then you sit next to them and listen. You give them undivided, focused attention. You don't give them *yes, but* listening—“Let me tell you how you really should feel or think.” We don't give them *I can top that* kind of listening like, “When I was your age, I walked 20 miles to school in 7 feet of snow barefoot backwards.” That shifts the attention from the other person onto yourself. Listening isn't about us. It is *other* focused. I have discovered over my years of pastor counseling that the greatest growth I have had is from learning to just simply *show up and shut up*. If I am listening well, all I need to say is, “Tell me more” and then reflect back what I have heard.

I want you to know that the skill of listening is an amazing gift, and I think there are very few of us who do it well. When our youngest was about 6 years old, she was talking with me and launched into a story with great joy and excitement and determination, which are such qualities of hers. My back was turned to her, I was busy doing my Emeril Lagasse deal, and she was sitting at the island behind me on a barstool. She demanded that I turn around. “Daddy, you turn around. Right now!” She asked me to move in close, and when I got close enough to her, she squeezed the cheeks on my face and brought me in even closer. Then she said, “Daddy, you listen to me.” Now if you want to connect with somebody, if you want to love somebody, then imagine yourself grabbing their face in a loving way and pulling them toward you with both hands. That is the kind of love we need to imitate, undivided, other-focused, service that is listening.

The “O” in LOVE is this. It is owning. It is owning our part of the problem and the conflict. It is not waiting for the other person to first admit that they are wrong. It is about us stepping into our own brokenness. We live in a culture that is constantly blaming others, and we are fully active, card-carrying members of this blaming culture. An article in the Strib [StarTribune newspaper] about three weeks ago written by Gail Rosenblum was entitled *Our Society's Urge to Blame Is a Fault We Must Address*. She says, “We're a country gifted at blaming one another for everything from gas prices to our personal unhappiness to who left the toilet seat up.”

She says Wendy Wyatt in the communication and journalism department at the University of St. Thomas, a great school, I might add, almost as good as St. John's, has studied the blame rhetoric in the media for the past two years. Professor Wyatt says that blaming “has become an impulse. We find it difficult not to blame.” She found that “conservatives and liberals were both givers and receivers of blame.” Her advice is to try to develop “a generosity of spirit, which means resisting the urge to tear people down” and blame others. It is a Biblical truth. Professor

Wyatt looked at more than 70 top national stories and discovered that the rhetoric is constantly filled with blaming. Now why is it so much easier for us to criticize others? Why is it so much easier for us to blame everyone else? Scripture tells us that it is difficult for us to see the splinter in someone else's eye because of the big, honking plank in our own eye.

None of us like to be blamed or overgeneralized about. Those kinds of statements immediately put us on the defensive. When someone says to me, "Rich, you're always saying dumb things," I go, "That's not true. Once in a while I don't say dumb things." Or when we overgeneralize and say, "You never show up on time" or "You make me feel angry," more often there are two sides to the story. You want to get to the heart of the story? Then admit your part and take some blame yourself.

So "L" is listening, "O" is owning, and "V" is for verbalizing. There's going to be a test at the end of this. In verse 26, Paul tells us not to sin in our anger and not to let our anger go unresolved because if we do, bitterness creeps in and with it, judgmentalism, rage, hatred, slander, brawling, and malice. When our anger goes underground, it comes out sideways, usually passive and aggressive in nature. Paul doesn't say, "Don't ever get angry." He says, "Don't destroy people with our anger." Anger is not a sin. In fact anger is on the same continuum of emotions as love. But Paul is saying, "Don't lose your temper. Don't destroy. Don't create fear and erode love and trust." This human emotion is something we have to take responsibility for. It is okay to admit I am angry. It is okay to say, "I am hurt." It is okay to say, "I need to resolve our differences." The ultimate value of communicating this way is that we create honest, vulnerable, humble relationships based on God's grace. It is not only verbalizing our anger and our hurt in a healthy way, but also expressing our thankfulness and love. Paul says,

<sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

I have the privilege of caring for a 42-year-old man who has esophageal cancer. He is not long for this world. He will probably die this week. Over the last six months I have been meeting with Spencer and have been encouraging him to learn how to develop his emotions and say, "I'm sorry," "I love you," "Thank you." In the last six or seven weeks, every text message I've gotten from Spencer has ended with "Thank you, Rich. I love you." Think about his wife and his six-year-old and four-year-old. When he leaves this world, there is going to be no question in their minds about Spencer's love for them. We have to verbalize. We have to say *thank you*. We have to say *I love you* because those statements build others up.

And finally, the "E" in LOVE. "L," listening; "O," owning; "V," verbalizing, "E" is about encouraging. Paul tells us,

<sup>29</sup> Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

Not name calling, lying, gossip, or criticism of others but only what is helpful in building others up according to their needs. Encouragement imputes confidence and healthy self-esteem and speaks deeply to the soul. It is powerful. It gives others courage. Next week John and Laura are going to talk about this in greater detail.

A deeply touching and tender moment of encouragement for me happened recently. About three weeks ago a couple called the church and said they wanted to see me. Immediately I became heavy-hearted and thought, "Oh, what did I say? What are they mad about? What did I do?" Internally I got defensive and thought about calling them back and telling them that I'm a lot like the deli counter at Byerly's. They can just take a number and get at the end of the line with all the others.

What happened was amazing. They came in, and I was so blown away. They said they were leaving the church, but they weren't mad. They said, "We are leaving because we are not in agreement with the direction of the church, but we wanted to come in to say *thank you*. We wanted to tell the church how much it has meant to us." They said they were grateful that their faith had developed and grown here and said, "This church has listened to us and prayed for us and visited us when we were sick." They said, "Rich, we even understood a few of your children's sermons." Wow! It felt so good that they would take the time to show up and communicate encouragement to a tired and questioning soul. Their love for me was a reminder of Christ's love. They came in to encourage me, and I felt powerful from their encouragement and their love.

In order for us to imitate Christ, in order for us to be copycats of Christ, we have to listen to others. We have to own our own stuff and verbalize our emotions. We have to encourage others and build up the souls of others. I've never had anyone come to me and say, "Rich, my love light is on full. I'm just getting way too much love." You see, we represent Christ here on earth. We are witnesses called to be children of God, and we are called to love. We just need to act a little more like Him.

Go out in love. What does LOVE mean? What does "L" mean? "Listen." Okay, crowd, be with me here. What does "O" mean? "Owning." What does "V" mean? "Verbalizing." And what does "E" mean? "Encouragement." Don't forget that!

Let's pray now!

Holy God, thank You for reminding us today that in order for us to build healthier relationships, we have to love the way You love us. You want to change us from something into somebody. Help us to listen. Help us to own our own stuff. Help us to verbalize and encourage others with the help of Your supernatural power and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*