

Modern-day Proverbs Sermon Series

Don't Talk to People from Other Rooms – Matthew 13:10-17

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Are you here? I mean, I can see you, so I know you are here physically. But are you really here? Maybe you're thinking about how you wish you'd had that second cup of coffee this morning before you left the house. Or maybe you're replaying a troubling conversation you had yesterday. Or maybe wondering if it's time to fire Mark Pope. Or maybe you're thinking about that puppy video you were just watching on our phone. You're here, I'm here, but are we really here?

We're in the middle of sermon series on modern-day proverbs, sayings that should have made the Bible but didn't, things like "Too many irons in the fire" and "When you point the finger at someone, you have three fingers pointing back at you." Our saying today is "Don't talk to people from other rooms."

Some of you know that Amy and I recently moved. We lived in our previous house for three years and had gotten used to the size of it, which a realtor would call "cozy" and we called "cramped." You couldn't open the refrigerator door without hitting the showerhead. Our new house isn't giant but it is a bit bigger, and several times we've found ourselves talking to each other from opposite ends of the house. Rather than walk 10 steps to look the Amy in the eye, I'll keep yelling and yelling and will eventually text her and say, "Do you hear me?"

"Don't talk to people from other rooms." That's really a saying about being present to each other, about paying attention to the other person, about fostering the connection that God calls us to make with another person. Rather than communicating from a distance, either physical or mental, we are called to eliminate distractions and be fully ourselves with each other.

That's hard to do, isn't it? I find it so easy to let my mind wander away when talking with someone - formulating what I'm going to say next, daydreaming about an experience I had, adding things to my mental to-do list. My family makes fun of me because I do this all the time. Molly once said, "Dad, guess what happened at school today?" "What?" "Well, I was eating a banana..." And I interrupted with, "Ooo! That reminds me I have to call Nana." This mental multi-tasking stuff is hard! And it keeps us from being fully present with the person right in front of us.

Even when we really want to be present, it can be difficult. Amy and I went to our favorite Mexican restaurant the other night to catch up and talk about our days over some chips and queso. We love this restaurant, but recently they installed a ton of new TVs, and Amy was sitting with her back to about four of them. So, while she's talking to me, my peripheral vision is being bombarded by Sportscenter and the local news and a green gecko selling car insurance. Even when you try to be in the same room with someone, this world makes it hard to focus on the person right in front of you.

This is part of what Jesus is talking about with his disciples. He's trying to help people understand his mission, what the kingdom of God looks like, but they are focusing on the little things, majoring in the minors. He says about them, "seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand." They're there with him, but they're not really there. And they didn't have the excuse of cellphones to distract them!

Those may be the biggest challenge to being present. Phones are greatest blessing and curse of our modern technology. We have the world of information in our pockets, but we also

have endless cute cat videos and candy-crushing games to distract us. I love the reel (which I saw on my cell phone!) of a woman watching something on her phone and laughing and saying, “Honey, you’ve got to watch this funny video!” She turns to her husband, who is lying at the bottom of the stairs, and she says, “Oh right! I was calling 911!”

You know, I don’t get the impression Jesus had this problem. I have a feeling that he enjoyed every day and used his cellphone only in emergencies. The people speaking to Jesus had his full attention, and they felt it. The woman at the well, the Pharisees offering a challenging question, the disciples yearning for guidance – Jesus stopped, he listened, he spent time with them, he gave them his full attention.

Mitch Albom, in his book “Tuesdays with Morrie,” wrote about the relationship he had with Morrie, his former professor who was dying of Lou Gehrig’s disease. Albom spent a lot of time in Morrie’s presence, learning from the dying man about the true meaning of life. Listen to what Albom wrote about Morrie, and imagine you were on the receiving end of Morrie’s attention.

“I came to love the way Morrie lit up when I entered the room. He did this for many people, I know, but it was his special talent to make each visitor feel that the smile was unique. And it didn’t stop with the greeting. When Morrie was with you, he was really with you. He looked you straight in the eye, and he listened to you as if you were the only person in the world. How much better would people get along if their first encounter of each day were like this – instead of a grumble from a waitress or bus driver or boss?”

“‘I believe in being fully present,’ Morrie said. ‘That means you should be with the person you are with. When I’m talking to you now, Mitch, I try to keep focused only on what is going on between us. I am not thinking about something we said last week. I’m not thinking about what’s coming up this Friday. I am talking to you. I am thinking about you.’”

Albom writes, “I remembered how he used to teach this idea in the Group Process class back at Brandeis. I had scoffed back then, thinking this was hardly the lesson plan for a university course. Learning to pay attention? How important could that be? Now I know it is more important than almost everything they taught us in college.”

Morrie was living out Jesus’ call to see, to hear, to understand the person in front of us. Being able to do that is a precious gift. M. Scott Peck wrote in “The Road Less Traveled,” “The principal form that the work of love takes is attention. When we love another we give him or her our attention.” And yet, when our lives get busy, which is about every day, it’s easy to take for granted the people who mean the most to us, to only talk to them from other rooms.

Paul writes in Galatians 5, “Serve one another in love.” He writes in Philippians 2, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.” In Romans 12 he writes, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.” The Bible makes it clear that our relationships are not there to serve us, but that we are in them to serve each other. Paying attention to one another is a form of service; it’s an act of love.

And what a gift it is - putting down our device and turning toward our spouse or children when they ask a question, minimizing the computer screen when a friend calls, tuning out the distractions around us and focusing on the person in front of us. There is so much need around us, but I believe the greatest need people have is to be seen, to be heard, to be acknowledged and accepted and validated as a valuable human being

I’ve had many counseling sessions where the other person has been so grateful for all my help. And here’s the help I offered: “Um-hm. Hmm. Yes. Tell me more.” I didn’t do anything! I

just listened. If we take the time to truly listen to someone else, we send them the message that they are important to us, that they matter to us, that nothing else is as important at that moment as giving them your full presence.

Rev. Julie Richardson puts it this way: “What matters is that we pay attention. What really matters is that we have someone close by to grab hold of as we watch and listen for a glimpse of Christ among us. What matters is that we take off the blinders of the rat race and really see this world we live in. What matters is that we learn to be fully present in whatever moment we find ourselves, realizing that, if we don’t, all too soon we will have missed so much.”

We have only been given a certain number of days in this life. I’m on number 19,760. I wonder in how many of them I’ve missed what was right in front of me because I was too busy, too distracted, too worried to be present? To be honest, I’m guessing most of them. We don’t know how many days we have. I hope it’s a lot more for all of us. But those days are limited. When I was much younger, I wished to be older – out of high school, old enough to drive, living on my own. Now that I’m older, I wish to be younger, to reclaim the time I’ve lost. But we don’t have yesterday anymore. And we have no guarantee of tomorrow. We simply have today, this day, a day to be present, a day to pay attention, a day that is a gift from God, a day that the Lord has made for us. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Be here. Right here. God has something for you today, and I’d hate for you to miss it.