

May 13, 2001

Mother's Day 2001

“HOW TO TALK TO YOUR WIFE...”

“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” - Ephesians 5:25

I read the other day that somewhere, out in the far west I think it was, a newly elected School Board decided to cancel Mother’s Day in its district this year. 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 They decreed that a day for mothers was an old fashioned and outdated holiday.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, less for 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 have not heard how it all turned out, but I will plan to update you on it next year!

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 whatnot, 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 listening. Before we get to that, let me give you some background on Mother’s Day itself.

The celebration and particular days set aside to honor mothers are nearly as old as civilization itself. For example, the ancient people of Phrygia (in Asia Minor) held a festival once each year to honor Cybele, the mother of all the gods. The Greeks had their day also. The Romans celebrated a Magna Mater Day – The Great Mother. On March 15 each year they held a three-day gathering, called of all things, "The Feast of Hilaria". Gifts were brought to the temple for the goddess mother.

During the middle Ages, a-Mothering Sunday was celebrated in Great Britain, on Spring break as it were, when young people came home from school. Mothering Sundays have been present in Great Britain, the Commonwealth countries and on the Continent of Europe for centuries.

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However things were too busy and too demanding when the British and Europeans first came to this continent. The first national attempt in the USA to initiate a Mother's Day was by the famous Julia Ward Howe, authoress of the Battle Hymn of the Republic. She was also an ambitious social reformer. No one took her too seriously however, perhaps because of her outspoken agenda of women's rights and abortion and world peace. When she combined those with honoring mothers, enthusiasm waned. Others followed Julia, but also with limited success.

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But, then came the Jarvis women: Mother Anna Maria Jarvis and her devoted daughter Anna, who determined almost single handedly that she would make Mother's Day an American holiday. Anna Maria Jarvis, the mother, was the daughter of the Methodist minister in the small town of Philippi, West Virginia (although, to be ecumenical I guess, she married a Baptist). They had 12 children; but as often happened back then, only four survived to adulthood. Anna was one, and she never married. She adored her mother. Following the death of Mrs. Jarvis in 1905, Anna continued nonstop, waging a battle for a National Mother's Day.

In the beginning she had to fight her own church, a little Methodist one in Grafton, West Virginia, to honor mothers there. The minister and council opposed the idea. They were reluctant to allow her to pass out carnations. The first time a modern Mother's Day was celebrated was at the Andrews Methodist Church in Grafton, West Virginia, on May 10, 1908 (the Sunday nearest to her mother's birthday). It was permitted only in the Sunday School Classes however, not in the church service. Dr. Howard did not even mention it from the pulpit. He thought it was too secular.

But in time, Anna prevailed. Other congregations took up the idea. She persuaded the Governor of West Virginia, William Glasscock, to proclaim the First Official Mother's Day in 1910. Then she worked on the Methodist Conference until they followed. Alabama and then Texas came after them. Finally, (I am exhausted even telling you the story; it took decades) President Woodrow Wilson issued a national proclamation in 1913, saying "the services rendered to our Nation by the mothers of America is the greatest strength of the country." Success, finally.

Before her death in 1948 however, Anna saw her sacred holiday turned into a festival of consumption. Her main regret late in life was that America had managed to transfer her family-religious Mother's Day into a vast commercial enterprise. John Wannamaker, who helped her, had a bonanza on his hands. The retail enterprise made millions. The Mother's Day holiday now dominates many markets. This year more than seven billion dollars (billion) will be spent remembering Mothers. 135 million cards will be sent,

many at two, three, five dollars each. Florists, restaurants, gift shops, long distance telephone companies, candy and perfume makers, et al, admit with glee that it is their busiest single day in the year. That in short, is the origin and the elaboration of Mother's Day. Anna Jarvis was not pleased in the end. Success ruined it!

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I could go on all day on the origin and practice of Mother's Day. For our sermon however I have narrowed the topic down to the question of communication between couples: How a man should talk to this wife. The reason I selected this aspect has a peculiar origin. I often ask people along the way what they think about possible sermon topics. One day this one came up. My wife was present; so was the wife of another minister. The wives were talking, as wives do, and when wives are together I have found that honesty usually prevails. The other wife, then of longer years of marriage said to my wife, "Has he (meaning me) ever learned to talk to you?"

What a question while I was sitting there! I was about to preen myself and bask in 40 years of marital glory.... I am a talker, I make my living talking. So you can imagine my astonishment when my Peggy, asked if I had ever learned to talk to her, said, "No! He never has." I was crushed. When we got home, she said she didn't mean it the way it sounded, but deep down, I suspected that she really did. The older woman answered, "Well neither has Lew!"

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Then I remembered talking to my mother, 20 years ago in the time before my father died. I said, "How's it going, Mom?" She said, "I'm O.K., Rich, but I'm lonely. Your father doesn't talk to me any more. In fact, I sometimes wonder if he ever did." Now, I tell you this not to demean my father (he had other things on his mind, I'm sure), 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.

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I often hear it in my study when couples come to see me in hopes of patching up their marriage. It is almost like a broken record, I have heard it so many different times: "He is 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 said, "I get on famously 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 moments each week they talked to each other, face-to-face. The answer "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 d’s 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.

Michael Collins, the former astronaut, once said, “The average man speaks 25,000 words per day. The average woman, 30,000. But the problem is that by the time the man gets home, his 25,000 are over and hers are just beginning!”

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

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I. I think that one reason why husbands do not talk to their wives is that the 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. I am 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, e.g.: There’s no question that I’m the boss at work; and maybe that other husband I mentioned who 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 uses elsewhere. It takes energy to talk.

I am aware that the impact our sermon seems to be limited to married couples. At the beginning it might seem to be. However the principles of communication to which I am referring here can easily be transferred to other close relationships and friendships. It also can be applied to children and their parents. It can help anywhere and everywhere.

The Marriage Encounter program has a little scheme, which you might adopt if you love your wife and don’t talk enough to her. It is called Ten-and-Ten. Each week of the 10,080 minutes, take ten minutes and write her a letter. She takes the same ten minutes and writes a letter to you, sharing ten minutes’ worth of feelings. Having done that, just

ten minutes more is all it takes. You trade the papers and sit down and talk about what each has written. That's so simple you might miss it. Try it. The greatest gift that we can give each other on this or any other day is not a present with a great big bow; the gift wanted is you, who you are and what you feel and what you believe about the world.

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II. Secondly, I think husbands do not talk to their wives because they are afraid of them: (Are you listening?) 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 have often seen it happen: the husband tries to share, but then she comes to see his weaknesses. None of us want our weakness 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 an Assistant Minister once who preached a sermon that he thought was quite good. It was near enough his first sermon. 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."

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III. 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 of God. Speak kindly to her, always. She has a difficult job to do, whether she is tied up with little children, or housework, or worrying, running after you, or moving into middle years when the children no longer need her, or helping you with your retirement, or even helping you with the problems of old age.

Whatever! It's 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.

So this is a command of Jesus Christ: "Speak kindly to her." The Bible says she is incomplete without you. She cannot live the fullness of her life until you allow her to

blossom and to grow within your marriage; until you help her. If you try to stifle her, if you are jealous of her, if..., if..., if... 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, or a breach of the marriage vow. I just mean we all need to talk to someone.

Our Bible passage in Ephesians 5 gets bad press; it is the place where St. Paul tells "women to be subject to their husbands; as Christ is head of the Church, so is the man head of the woman"...I don't know what you think about that just now. But, it follows: "Husbands, love your wives as you love your very body." It is curious the way 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 base line, the boating that you do, the fishing, hunting, running, the community experience, 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. Amen.

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