

“The Five Love Languages: Quality Time”
A Sermon for University Congregational Church
Sunday, March 15, 2020
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Traditional Word:

6 As we work together with [God], we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. 2 For [God] says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! --2 Corinthians 6:1-2

Contemporary Word:

“The trouble is, you think you have time.” Buddha

“Quality time does not mean that we have to spend our together moments gazing into each other’s eyes. It means that we are doing something together and that we are giving our full attention to the other person.”

— Gary Chapman

“I am amazed by how many individuals mess up every new day with yesterday. They insist on bringing into today the failures of yesterday and in so doing, they pollute a potentially wonderful day.”

— Gary Chapman

Ah, quality time—you elusive and enigmatic thing, you! We hear it all the time—quality time over quantity time! I need to spend more quality time with my children. I need to spend more quality time with my spouse! I need to spend more quality time with my family! Quality time—what a concept!

My favorite thought about the enigmatic and inscrutable word “Quality” comes from a book I read as a young man: “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance” by Robert Pirsig. The entire book is a treatise on this idea of “quality”--what it is and

what it isn't. I'm sure we all have our opinions on what the term means, but it's hard to pin it down. We like to say we know it when we see it.

In "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" Mr. Pirsig basically makes this definition of quality: When my experience of something—an event, a product, a relationship—exceeds my expectations then the "quality" of that thing is increased. So exceeding expectations is one way in which we might define the term quality. I've always liked that and I've always tried to apply this in my own life. Not always successful, but it's what I aim for.

If we apply that measure of quality to the idea of the time we spend with people and the time we invest in our relationships--if we can anticipate what others' expectations are and maybe try to improve over that--then we might improve the quality of the time together. For example, if your child only expects from you a baseline of attention, a passing hello, or a brief "how are you", then it's going to be really easy to exceed that expectation, no? And if your spouse only expects you to come home, throw down your briefcase and start complaining about your day, then the expectation is pretty low, no? It'd be really easy to improve the quality of situations.

Gary Chapman, the author of many books about the 5 Love Languages--our focus for this sermon series--suggests a number of simple habits we can get into that might help improve the quality of our time together. Focused attention; Quality Conversation; Learning to Talk; and Quality Activities.

The first one, Focused Attention, requires us to do something many of us don't like to do. We have to remove screens from our time together: Television screens, phones

screens, computer screens. Duane and I have a rule: No screens at the dinner table either at home or at a restaurant—this takes some effort on our part—and there are exceptions to this rule, for instance if we're discussing something and one of us wants to look something up, Wikipedia being a few swipes away makes it very convenient—or if there's something on social media we want to share with each other—but, for the most part—dinner time together is just that—time together. And we relish these moments. Often they are the only time in our hectic days that we actually get to be together, even briefly, and it's a special time. You can feel both of us relaxing—getting into the rhythm of our conversation—simply enjoying being in each other's presence with things to share. These times together are sacred and important.

And you may have noticed that I try to extend this practice of no screens into my interactions with each of you. Ever since a seminary class on good pastoral care, when you come into my office, I do everything in my power to turn my complete attention toward you. I move my chair from in front of my computer and sometimes even turn my screen off. Unless the phone rings, I do my very best to not look at a screen—not even my smart watch! AND, here's something for you—you all have permission to remind me of this! If we're together and I start glancing away, please feel free to remind me of this sermon! I want to be completely present when you and I are together. We both deserve no less.

As for your more romantic relationships, Gary Chapman writes in his book on the Five Love Languages that: "Quality time does not mean that we have to spend our

together moments gazing into each other's eyes. It means that we are doing something together and that we are giving our full attention to the other person.”

Focused attention is a vital element for quality time together....

OK—so you've given your undivided attention to your partner, your spouse, your child, your friend...whomever....now what? Do we talk about the weather? The coronavirus? What? Chapman, in his book on the Five Love Languages, tells us that “Quality conversation is quite different from the other love languages. Words of Affirmation focus on what we are saying, whereas quality conversation focuses on what we are hearing.” This is sometimes referred to as “active listening”. Really listening, with intention, to what the other person is saying. We do this by maintaining eye contact with the other person, by really listening—not doing anything else, not fidgeting or checking a screen—we listen for the feeling and emotional content of the words being said. Is my partner sad? Anxious? Happy? What's going on over there—it means giving the time to be invested in this relationship! We also watch body language—are your husband's fists clenched? Is your child trembling? Look for clues to give you some insight into their emotional space. And finally, and I'm getting better at this one, but it's difficult for someone as enthusiastic as me—but, don't interrupt. Research has indicated that the average individual listens for only seventeen seconds before interrupting and interjecting her own ideas—or, that terrible sin of our time “mansplaining”. And guys, you know you're guilty of it! It's partly how we're wired, and it's partly cultural—but we need to recognize it for what it is and learn to actively listen to the others in our lives.

Some of us need to learn how to talk. And what our author means by this is being honest with where we are. I've gotten good at saying to some of the people in my life that: "Hey, I'm just not that good of a mind reader." I know you're trying to tell me something, but I'm not getting it. Be specific about what you need. And be honest with yourself. Too many of us are trying to avoid conflict that we just nod and agree.

As the book puts it also, beware of being either a Dead Sea or a Babbling Brook. You know the types—some of you ARE the types: The Dead Sea: "How are you, honey" Fine. "What happened at school today?" Nothing. "What are you upset about dear? I can see your fists are clenched and there is a tear in the corner of your eye." It's nothing. The Dead Sea may be churning with emotion under the surface, but often we can get past the first wave. Open up! And then on the other end of the spectrum is the Babbling Brook. Now sometimes, we just need to talk, but sometimes I think we just like the sound of our voice and we just go on and on and on. And on. And on. Now, Robin and I are trained professionals and it's our job to babble, but even I get tired of the sound of my own voice sometimes! Try to practice a little self-awareness and see if you can develop a habit of healthy, quality conversation without being either a dead sea or a babbling brook.

Finally, Chapman wants us to engage in quality activities. Things that are constructive in nature—constructive not only in terms of a project—but constructive of relationship as well. Gardening, visiting historic sites, bird-watching, going to a concert or a museum, taking a walk together, cooking together—trying something new—not simply sitting on the couch and watching TV. Television watching is a

passive activity and doesn't build new connections in your brain. When you engage in a quality activity you do just that—you actually build your brain—and you build strong memories. Can anyone here remember what television show you were watching a year ago—details about it? Probably not—but I bet everyone who went on one of our zoo outings last summer has really good and strong memories of that. Quality activities engage your brain in different ways than just passively watching the tube. When we watch TV we become immune to the present moment.

Probably the biggest piece of this idea of “quality time” is an ability to be present in the “now”. In his book, “The Power of Now” Eckhart Tolle (Tol-lay) uses his training in Buddhism and meditation as a starting point for understanding the importance of being present in this moment. Right here—right now. And how this habit can lead to improved quality in our time together. Even as I'm speaking these words to you your minds are busy with a hundred other things. Maybe a word I said took you down a path of memory, or maybe you're trying to understand what on earth I meant when I gave you that definition of quality earlier. Our minds are constantly receiving sensory information and trying to filter out what's important versus what's not so important. We're processing tons of sensory data every second and only a small fraction actually gets our attention. It's very hard to be present in this moment because often we're just trying to figure out what happened in the past one, or we're anxious about what will happen in a future one. Eckhart Tolle wrote this: “Time isn't precious at all, because it is an illusion. What you perceive as precious is not time but the one point that is out of time: the Now. That is precious indeed. The more you are focused on time—past and future—the more you miss the Now, the most

precious thing there is.” He goes on: “All negativity is caused by an accumulation of psychological time and denial of the present. Unease, anxiety, tension, stress, worry - all forms of fear - are caused by too much future, and not enough presence. Guilt, regret, resentment, grievances, sadness, bitterness, and all forms of nonforgiveness are caused by too much past, and not enough presence.”

Tolle is trying to get us to see the importance of the moment we are existing in right now—because now is all that matters. Not the game that is going to start in a few hours. Not the argument that you and your spouse had last week. Now—what’s happening right now. What are you feeling—what are you experiencing. What are you complaining about? Pay attention to your complaining Tolle writes: “See if you can catch yourself complaining, in either speech or thought, about a situation you find yourself in, what other people do or say, your surroundings, your life situation, even the weather. To complain is always nonacceptance of what is. It invariably carries an unconscious negative charge. When you complain, you make yourself into a victim. When you speak out, you are in your power. So change the situation by taking action or by speaking out if necessary or possible; leave the situation or accept it. All else is madness.”

Even the Apostle Paul had something to say about the power of now when he wrote in his second letter to the church in Corinth these words: “As we work together with [God], we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. 2 For [God] says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation

Jesus and the early Christ-following Jews knew the immense power in being fully present in the now---maybe because they sensed they had so little time together to try and change their world. They had so little time to disrupt the incredible machinery of the Roman Empire, or of any Empire for that matter—they had to disrupt it—so that people could see how they had become enslaved while thinking and believing they were free. Simply spending time to get to the next thing—simply trying to alleviate the boredom of our oppressed minds. Some of us don't even know that we're captives. As the Buddha once said: "The problem is, you think you have time." Spending time instead of cultivating time. Cultivating in the rich soil of now.

I think part of what we do here each Sunday is to break up the routine—to remind us that we don't have time. To stop spending time we don't really have and start cultivating the time we really do have. To give us a "now" to be present in that is structured and familiar. To pull ourselves out of our daily patterns a bit and to sit and listen (or watch) and contemplate and question and struggle and sing and pray and just be together—even if it's remotely for a while

. Life in a Christian community such as University Congregational Church can be so rewarding. We get to come together—refresh our spirits—be challenged and affirmed and supported and loved. Tell me, where else in our modern world can you get so much benefit? So much quality? So much God-time?

I pray that you take this spirit of refresh-ment—of newness—of rebirth—with you out of here and into the world each week. I pray that you are recharged, reenergized, refocused and refreshed—ready for what the coming week holds, because you

know at the end of it, you have another opportunity come here—to be in community with like-minded folks—and to recharge your spirits.

May each interaction you have this week rekindle in you're the fire and spirit of life.

In the garden that is your life, may you plant seeds of deep love and may you harvest the fruit of your love in the cultivation of quality, rich, meaningful, beneficial and love-filled time.

Amen

RESOURCES

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