

For those of you who may have missed church last week, this is the second in a two part series on improving general family relationships. I am not talking here about some of the intense issues that need special focus and sometimes emergency attention in families, things like abuse or addiction, but just the general basic climate of family life. And I use the word “family” in a very loose sense to mean any of the following: nuclear family, extended family, church family, families of one’s own choosing, close friendship groups, you get the idea.

Last week we looked at some of the things NOT to do, which can be summarized pretty well by the statement, “do not be indirect or passive-aggressive in conflict.” Some of the specific suggestions were not to go sidewise to other people in conflict, (also known as gossip) but rather to go cleanly and directly only to the one with whom you are in conflict. Another suggestion was not to use teasing as a smoke screen, such that you get to say what you want but don’t have to take responsibility for it. (“I was only kidding...”) I suggested that in our church family it is important not to claim to speak for others, but to speak only for oneself and never anonymously. I also suggested that in families it is healthier not to use “the silent treatment” but instead work through things openly and respectfully. in general, I was suggesting that we not use any of these sideways methods of dealing with conflict which can so quickly create a baseline climate of bickering or gossip, or apathy, emotional disconnection and deadness, to get established as the general tone for family life.

So those were the don’ts. This week I’d like to take a look at some of the “do’s,” things that are proactively positive in helping to create an overall climate of warmth and love. I’ll start with some general suggestions, and then get more specific.

My first general suggestion goes back to Psalm 1. Perhaps the most important thing families of any configuration can do to maintain a warm and loving baseline is for each member to work at maintaining their own emotional and spiritual health. I titled last week's sermon for Mother's Day, "If Mama Aint Happy, Nobody's Happy." But the truth is families in general are probably only as happy as their unhappiest member. Each of our individual, emotional and spiritual conditions has an energy to it. We call them moods. We feel it from each other when somebody is upset or unhappy. Mood and emotion are contagious, both the positive ones and the negative ones. And the first thing we can do in groups is take care of our own state of consciousness so as hopefully to be contagious with loving energy, good vibes, so to speak. Again, that is not to say there won't ever be conflict, which gets back to why it is so important to deal with conflict directly and healthfully. But what I'm talking about here is more general than that, it has to do with the basic wallpaper of our inner lives. Are we living from that Psalm One place of underground connection to the wellspring of love and spiritual health? Or are we unconsciously caught up within the narrow confines of our own ego mind, a mentality from which we are unconsciously prone to judge and defend and push our own agendas and opinions as if they are trophies worth dying for. When we find ourselves caught in those lower states of consciousness, the best thing we can do is notice it, just simply become aware of it, then breath and lessen our attachment to whatever the struggle is, and shift our roots back to the lifegiving stream; ask the Spirit of Wholeness to raise us up to a higher level of consciousness, one of love.

Marianne Williamson, based on The Course In Miracles, has said that everything somebody says or does is either an act of love or a call for love. In other words, in

every moment, every situation, somebody is either demonstrating love or is somehow crying out for it. The first and most important thing we can do to improve our families' climates is to take responsibility for the ingredients we are adding to the overall alchemy, and to commit ourselves each day to being agents of love, which means operating from connection to our spiritual source; being the tree planted by the water rather than the rootless tumbleweed blown about by random winds.

I daresay that if we each maintained our spiritual connection in a deep and real way, every single day, if we each spent time each day getting rooted first of all in God's love, in that larger perspective, and each monitored our own reactive ego-minds, then our family and community lives would change dramatically.

Beyond that generality, I have a few specific suggestions as well. My first suggestion which I alluded to last week is that we try harder to practice good manners with one another in family life. I'm not talking about napkin in your lap type stuff here, but more relational manners, because there is some real truth to the old adage that familiarity breeds contempt. We can quickly come to take each other for granted and fail to show basic courtesies to our life partners and those closest to us. Now I know that balanced against this is the need for home to be "one's soft place to fall" where we can be ourselves. But I think we can maintain that quality of comfort and still treat each other with the basic courtesies of really listening to each other, not interrupting, striving to be pleasant and kind and affirming rather than critical, and maybe just shutting off the screens now and then.

There was an elderly couple in our church in Minnesota and because of a rusty memory, he had the habit of repeating stories now and then. Now I had heard most of

his stories several times, so I know his wife's count was probably in the hundreds at least. Yet every time I saw him repeat stories that we had all heard, his dear wife looked at him with rapt attention as if she had never heard it before. This was just one of the kindnesses they practiced with one another. Along with praising each other for specific things in front of other people, and never interrupting or bickering. Their home was a respite of warmth and nurture, and just by their behavior they taught us all a lot about setting and maintaining the kind of climate they wanted to live with.

So indeed, how about taking it a step farther from basic courtesies to proactive affirmation, naming the positive that we see in one another? How long has it been since you told a family member some of the specific things you appreciate about them? When we name those things in one another, we lubricate the gears of family life. We oil the machinery and contribute to that overall climate of warmth and love, as opposed to desolation. We raise each other up.

And of course I have to come back to the most obvious yet perhaps hardest habit to cultivate proactively which is REALLY to listen to one another. We cannot say it often enough that most of us listen, especially in disagreement, in order to respond or rebut, but not usually to understand. Particularly in matters of conflict, what if we could set aside our own position for awhile and truly, deeply seek to understand the other person's feelings? Sometimes what we most want and need is not particularly to be right, or even to have something changed, but just to be truly, deeply heard and understood.

We have the power right in our own hands, to nurture and bless and raise each other up, or to pick and bicker or take for granted, and drag each other down. Every word we

say or every bit of body language we offer, has an energy to it. It will contribute either to a climate of healing love or to a climate of desolation or toxicity. Every interaction is either love or a call for love. Let's more often choose to raise each other up.