

Two Keys to Successful Relationships
17 Pentecost, Year B, 2009, September 27, 2009
James 5:13-16

I do a lot of pre-marriage counseling, working with engaged couples who are planning to get married. They've got a lot riding on this relationship working out, so they're usually quite motivated to go through the work I insist they do. We work through all the various issues that are important to a couple – family goals, handling of finances, sexuality, in-laws, professional goals, and so on. But there are two other factors that are more important than any of these: the first is good communications. The second is generous giving to each other.

In fact, I would claim that good communications and generous giving are the key ingredients to success in any relationship. Including our relationship with God. Let's examine these two ingredients because they are so important to us.

Let's look at good communications first. When I meet with a couple planning to get married, we spend most of our time on communications, because if a couple can learn to communicate with each other, they can deal with almost anything else that gets thrown their way.

If good communications between persons is so important, don't you think that good communication between people and God would also be important?

Over the past few weeks, our Sunday New Testament readings have focused on the Letter of James. Of all the books in the New Testament, I think it could be said that James is the most practical. In fact, for anyone who thinks Christianity is too theoretical, too much about lofty general principles and not enough about details about how to live, they need to read James. For example, in the chapters preceding today's lesson, James has covered practical topics relevant to our daily life: like dealing with temptation, being a person of action instead just all talk, the importance of service, problems like gossip, judging others, boasting and impatience. So James takes a practical look at life. In today's lesson, James talks about prayer. So the first thing to notice is that James sees prayer as a part of practical living. He sees prayer as, if you will, a tool you need to have for how to live. Prayer is not some mystical mumbo jumbo beyond the reach of ordinary folks. It is a serious down-to-earth resource that you and I need to use.

Now James begins this section by telling us there are two times when we need to pray: when things are going well and when things are not going well. And I believe he is implying that we are to pray in all the times in between too.

But people tell me they have a hard time praying. Here are a couple of concerns they often have. *I don't know how to pray.* My response is: just talk to God. Use your own words. If you can't come up with words, just groan or sigh or scream, but reach out to God. The Bible says that when we don't know how to pray, the Holy Spirit gives us sighs that are too deep for words. Don't worry that your prayer doesn't sound like some fancy prayer out of the Prayer Book. Just spit it out! God's first language isn't English anyway.

Another concern goes like this: *I'm too inconsequential or I'm too much of a sinner or I'm too ... whatever for God to be interested in me.* Or here is a variant of this concern: *God's too busy to listen to my pathetic little problems.* No he isn't! Where'd you get that crazy idea? God knows the number of hairs on your head. He's very interested in you. One woman told me that she prays so often that God must say, impatiently, "Oh, it's you again!" I said I think that when she prays, no matter how often, God says, with delight and anticipation, "Oh, it's you again!"

Now let's look at the times we should pray. James says pray when you are suffering. God will be present when you call on him. Call on him when you're sick, when you're down in the dumps, when you're afraid. Ask others to pray for you. If you are sick, or someone you love is sick, ask to be anointed. God answers prayers – not always with the outcome you may have requested – after all, he is not a push-button robot God. But he will respond in a way that when you look back some time in the future, you'll be able see that God's guiding, protecting, healing hand was indeed upon you all along.

And James says the other time to pray is when you are cheerful. This may be the hardest time for us to pray. Too often we're inclined to view God as our celestial Get-of-Jail-Free card that I use when I'm hurting, then file away at other times. When things are going great I'm all too happy to step in take credit for it. It's okay now, God. Thanks for checking in, but I've got

everything under control now. In fact I'm doing just fine, God, so why don't you head off and create a new galaxy or something. But James says when you're cheerful, sing songs of praise!

You see, God is a life-long companion who wants to be part of every moment of your life. He sees you like a child of his. Like any parent, he wants to hear from his kids. It's less important what the kids say than to just hang out with them. When my son Lucas comes to visit, I think about having some deep father-to-son dialogue, but most often he just wants to hang out. So we go out in a little motor boat and we fish. We lay back and toss our lines into the water, don't say a whole lot, just laugh about silly things, talk about where we think the big ones are lurking, and what we want for supper. Not too heavy. But because it's my son there with me, and I suspect that because it's his dad there with him, it's just wonderful. It's precious and treasured time. Even though no heavy duty conversations about life goals or philosophical outlook ever took place. I think that's how God feels about us. He loves us, we're his children, and he wants to hang out with us. Listen: There is nothing about us, not one thing, that is ever boring to God.

Now let's talk about the second ingredient in a successful relationship: generous giving to each other. In a marriage, it is said that if each partners gives seventy-five percent, then the marriage will work. When I counsel couples preparing for marriage, I often have them study a verse from the twelfth chapter of Romans. This is a very important chapter that tells us how to treat each other. It makes good companion reading to James. The verse I have in mind says, "*Outdo one another in showing honor.*" That is, give lavishly to each other, don't measure and ask am I getting my fair share? How much honor and generosity does she deserve from me? How little giving can I get away with? If we directed our giving to each other based on questions like these, our relationships would be disasters. No we are to outdo one another in showing honor! Give generously out of your love and gratitude.

Now my kids and Mary and I give each other gifts. Oh sure, we like to give gifts at Christmas or birthdays, but often we just like to give each other gifts for no particular reason. Just because we love them. Mary recently made Karl a quilt, and I saw how much love she put into that. Lucas is getting into cooking in a serious way – and I recently saw a really cool frying pan on sale and I just had to get it for him. Karl recently sent us a big print of one of his photographs, it was wonderful. And Mary is often very thoughtful – far more than I am – about giving me gifts. A back-rub, a poem. We really enjoy doing stuff like this because we are so grateful for each other.

How grateful are you for God? Singing praises to him, as James says, is one way of giving to him. But you will want to do more. We often talk about giving to God of our time, talent and treasure. We give of our time and talent by teaching Sunday School, or helping God's people in the community, or helping keep our church maintained – there are many ways. We give of our treasure by giving money that enables the church to do ministry in God's name.

Now what I want to tell you about giving to God is simply this. Do it out of your gratitude and generosity. No, you won't be able to outdo God in showing honor, because he's already given you everything you have and the best you can do is give back to him some of what he has already given you in the first place. But do it out of gratitude and love. Do not give to the church because it's an obligation, or because it's expected of you, or because the church needs it. What kind of personal relationship would you have with a friend if those were the reasons you gave something to them? Gratitude and love – those are the reasons to give.

Because this is a personal relationship between you and God, nobody in the church needs to know anything about what you give him. I am never informed about how much money someone gives, I don't know what anyone pledges, other than my family, and neither does the senior warden or the vestry. One person, our treasurer, does know because someone has to maintain records. But he's the only one with detailed knowledge about it. Because it's personal between you and God.

I think we're all looking for deeper relationships with those we love – our family, our friends, our God. The key – I say again – is good communications and generous giving. I hope you'll be talking to God today and every day and listening to what he has to say to you. Get to know about his love for you, feel his presence, hang out with him in the hard times and the good time, in all the times. He sees you as his child. He longs to hear from you. Often. All the time, in fact. Lavish your love upon him. Give him your heart. Because he's already given you his. AMEN

--- Fr. Jim Trainor