Sunday, May 10, 1981
**WHEN AND HOW TO SPEAK**
Ecclesiastes 3:1-7; Ephesians 4:15-16

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven; a time to keep silence and a time to speak." "Speaking the truth in love,..." These are just two examples of what the Bible has to say about when and how we are to speak with each other. The right kind of speaking is especially important in our families and in other close human relationships.

The words we speak are such a common part of life, particularly in the family, that we sometimes forget how important they are. Some words are spoken casually, others carefully, and still others cautiously. Sometimes too, words that might have helped or healed are left unspoken, while words that should not have been said are spoken. Words can deeply wound, and words can do more healing than we often realize. "I'm sorry," "forgive me," "I love you."

So today as Christians, let's consider again this whole matter of speaking — particularly in our families; realizing that what applies to families, also applies to other human relationships. When and how are we to speak?

1. First of all, it's important to speak in time. Too often people say, "If only I had told him how much I cared." What holds us back from telling someone how much we love them is a mystery, but we do it.

To speak in time is especially crucial with our words of caring. In fact, words of love, words of concern, words of gratitude, compliments — these kinds of words can rarely be spoken at the wrong time. They are always appropriate, while other kinds of words may not be.

What a tragedy to hear someone say, "In all these forty years I cannot ever remember my father saying that he loved me, or that he was concerned about me." On the other hand, I remember one woman saying to me that her husband after 46 years of marriage finally said one day, "After hearing Dr. Young's sermon, and since it is Christmas and all, I want you to know it has been hard for me to say, but you know I have always loved you."

Not too long after in this case, the husband died. Even though he waited a long time, he finally did speak in time. His wife told me that it was the best Christmas gift she had ever received.

But I also knew a man who was married to a very loving wife for thirty-seven years and he came home from work one day to find that his wife had suffered a massive stroke. She was rushed to the hospital, and in spite of the best available medical attention, she died a few hours later. After the funeral, the husband in shock and grief told his best friend, "Do you know what the worst thing is of all about her death? I loved her more than anyone in the whole world and was never able to tell her." He did not speak in time.

Today, speak in time. Tell that person you love that you do love her. Give someone that compliment you've always wanted to give. Tell that individual how much she or he means to you. Express the thankfulness you've felt but never have put into word5 in a persona1 way. Speak in time!

2. Secondly, it's important in our speaking with one another that we not only speak in time, but that we speak at the right time. As the book of Ecclesiastes reminds us — "There is a time to keep silence and a time to speak."

And have you noticed that the words which are most often spoken at the wrong time are words of complaint, or words of condemnation, or words of accusation, or words of criticism.

To speak our words at the right time, that's not always easy. In the family there are times to speak and times to be silent. It is usually a happy family whose members know when those times are.

One aid to help us speak at the right time is to listen and listen very carefully before one speaks too quickly. An old folk saying reminds us, "It is often better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak and remove all doubt."

Learn to listen and to listen carefully and you will speak less often at the wrong time.

Careful listening, however, does not come easily for many of us. A woman returned from spending a year in the Peace Corp. She came back with her new husband, and as her parents watched her get off the plane, they were horrified to see that her husband was carrying a spear, a set of rattles, and he had ankle bracelets, a bone through his nose, large earrings, a fancy headdress and a painted face.

"No, you dummy," screamed her mother, "I told you to marry a rich doctor."

Listening for some of us is difficult because we are so eager to speak ourselves. We are in such a hurry to get our message across that we interrupt the person in the middle of his thought.

But when we truly listen, we keep ourselves from speaking the wrong words at the wrong time. Recently a father to1d me about an incident with his teenage daughter. She had come home almost an hour late one evening. He was angry that she had violated what he considered to be a rather liberal curfew for a girl of her age. As she started to explain her lateness, he was about to reprimand her. He decided however to carefully listen to her explanation. When she had finished, he truly understood the predicament she had found herself in when she tried her best to get a ride home at the right time. He said little but listened a lot. A few days later, his daughter spontaneously kissed him and said, "Thanks for understanding what happened a couple of nights ago."

Jesus Christ knew when to listen and when to speak. When he was confronted with the woman caught in adultery and asked by those who accused her what should be done and they reminded him that the law of Moses commanded such women to be stoned to death — instead of quickly speaking, the Gospel of John tells us that Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.

Those who had brought the woman continued to ask him for a decision on what should be done with her. Finally, after a long silence, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." Then again, he bent down and v1rote with his finger on the ground. (silence) After a time, all the accusers quietly went away, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Then and only then he spoke to the woman in quiet and forgiving tones, "Where are they? Has no one condemned you?" And

she said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you, go, and do not sin again.”

To speak at the right time. It helps if we wait before we speak too quickly. It can truly be the pause that refreshes.

3. A third guide to our speaking is to speak in the right way. In the letter to the Ephesians, we are reminded to “speak the truth in love.”

To speak the truth, means among other things, not to speak words carelessly and thoughtlessly. That’s why Jesus reminds us that we will have to render account for every careless word we utter.

Think of the careless words that are spoken all the time--words that mislead; words that stretch the truth; words that tell only part of the truth; words spoken for effect; words with exaggerate; words which hurt; words which we wish we had never spoken.

And the problem is that once words have been said they are impossible to call back — they live on to hurt or betray or mislead. We’ve all said words which we wish we could’ve reached out and grabbed and put back into our mouths and swallowed.

There is so much careless speaking! Statements are made which have no foundation in fact. Simple answers are given to complex questions. Some time ago I was at a luncheon where most of the people present were making unchallenged statements about racial justice. Finally, one Christian woman blew the whistle on the trivia and half-truths we all find so easy to mouth. She spoke in time, at the right time and in the right way.

Gossip is another form of speaking in the wrong way and at the wrong time. It too is a form of careless speaking.

A German folk story tells of a boy who was talking in an unkindly fashion about other people. His father had him take a bag of goose feathers and fling them out of a second-floor window. The wind swirled them into the corridors and alleys. Then he said to the boy, “That’s the way your words to out into society. Now go out and pick up all the goose feathers.” The boy said, “That’s impossible!” “So, it is impossible to take back the words you’ve uttered,” said the father.

Former President Nixon and others who had their words recorded during the Watergate era wished that the tapes had never been made or that they had been destroyed. Far better if they had wished they had never said the words in the first place.

To speak in the right way is to speak the truth in love.

Furthermore, as in learning to speak at the right time, speaking in the right way also requires careful listening and then a thoughtful response.

Here’s an examp1e: A woman says to her husband as he arrives home, “It’s been a terrible day. The dog ran away, and the sewer system backed up and Pete is running a fever of 102 degrees.” The husband responds, “Well, what do you want me to do about it? I’ve got enough troubles of my own.”

To speak in the right way, the husband might have rather responded, “Wow, it certainly seems as if everything went wrong.”

Another example: The son says to his mother, “My physics teacher gave us three chapters to read, and my English teacher told us the term paper is due next week. I also have a history quiz that I have to take tomorrow morning.”

Mother’s response: “Well you should prepare for these things in a more serious way than you have been doing.” Or she might better have said, speaking in the right way, “You really feel overloaded, don’t you.” The son is not asking for advice, he is asking for understanding.

The book of Proverbs in the Old Testament says, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.” That’s to speak the truth in love.

So, there it is, our Christian faith calls us to speak in time, to speak at the right time and to speak in the right and that means to speak the truth in love. Above all, let your words become flesh, that is, let your actions be the same as your words of love and care.

Even criticism, warning and rebuke needs to be spoken with love. One Christian mother wrote this prayer:

Direct the things I say, and give them blessing too.
Direct and bless everything that I think and speak and do.
Amen.