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On both of our cars there is a little sticker in the upper left hand corner of the windshield that serves as reminder that in three months or 3,000 miles it is time to change the oil. Failing to change the oil in your vehicle every 3 months or 3,000 miles whichever comes first can lead to problems with your engine that can cause the engine not to function as cleanly and efficiently as it should eventually even leading to a breakdown or expensive repairs. Some of you probably change the oil in your vehicles yourself. No one is ever going to mistake me for Mr. Goodwrench, but I am pretty diligent about getting the oil changed on a regular basis. Most people who drive a car know this is something that must be done or else there will be a price to pay down the road. We recognize the necessity of tuning up our car and changing the oil and doing preventative maintenance. However, what is important to do for a car is even more essential for the most intimate relationships in our lives, particularly for marriages.

Life can get so busy, full, and hectic, that married couples neglect or forget that relationships require preventative maintenance just as much if not more than their car engines. Failing to give time, attention, and care to a marriage can lead to a breakdown or costly problems.

I wrestled with the title and subject of this sermon, Tuning Up Your Marriage. I was concerned that those of you who are under 18 or single or never married or widowed or divorced might think, *"This has nothing to do with me or to offer me."* My hope is that will not be the case because the attitudes, actions and behaviors that make for a healthy, strong, and happy marriage also are applicable and relevant for good relationships with members of our family and our friends.

So today I'd like to talk about marriage. Yesterday I was privileged to join Larry and Karen Hansen in Christian marriage at the Old Sea Pines Inn here in Brewster. When people think about marriage one of the first things they think about is the wedding day and the ceremony. Folks always hope the day will be perfect, but sometimes things don't always go as planned. Wedding ceremonies, like marriages, often aren't perfect.

One of the most commonly used scriptures at weddings is 1 Corinthians 13 which is part of what Paul calls "the more excellent way."

"Love is patient; love is kind;

love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends.” 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a

What kind of love is Paul talking about? I should be clear when I say Paul I mean the Paul who wrote much of the New Testament, not Paul McCartney who turned 64 this past week and who sang about love about 40 years ago,

“Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I’m 64?”

We cannot understand these familiar verses from 1 Corinthians properly without knowing that there are a variety of words for love in the Greek language of the New Testament. All three kinds of love are important to a well-tuned marriage. The Greeks have the word *eros*, meaning physical and sexual attraction and fulfillment—a legitimate aspect of marital love. The Scriptures say we are not to engage in sexual activities outside the confines of marriage. Paul says a marriage without sexual activity is defrauding each other. However, marriages need a lot more than *eros* love.

Another dimension of love is called *phileo*. This love has to do with friendship and companionship. In a healthy marital relationship, there will be mutual physical attraction and sexual fulfillment. There should also be friendship and things you enjoy about each other. You should feel you are best friends enjoying one another’s companionship.

You can have all kinds of *phileo* and *eros* and still not approach what the Bible means by love that makes marriage work best. The third word in Greek is *agape*. This word describes God’s love for us. This word is used to describe our love as those who operate under God’s principles.

In 1 Corinthians 13, when the Bible tells us the greatest thing in the world is love, it isn’t saying the greatest thing in the world is *eros* or *phileo*. It is *agape* love. The obvious illustration of this is God’s love toward us. God chose to be committed to our well being even when we were not very lovable.

Agape love in the confines of marriage is a commitment on the part of each married partner to be primarily concerned for the well being of the other—even when one is displeasing and/or does not respond appropriately.

The Bible teaches quite clearly that *agape* love is directly related to the work of the Holy Spirit. Galatians 5 says, "The fruit of the Spirit is love." The word used there is *agape*. When we talk of this unusual love—this commitment to the well being of the other person—we're talking about something related to the work of the Holy Spirit in people's lives. This is not to suggest that people who are unbelievers cannot have fulfilling marriages. Clearly they do. There are many unbelievers who behave with more maturity and dignity in their lives and marriages than some professed believers.

When we think in terms of *agape*, we mean the operation of the Holy Spirit producing in us something bigger, grander, and nobler than we ourselves are capable of. *Agape* love is the result of the Holy Spirit operating within our lives, but **it is also the result of making a definite commitment to target somebody with *agape* love and pursuing loving them relentlessly.**

The cover of the February 2006 issue of National Geographic Magazine is a picture of a man and woman about to kiss and the cover story is Love: The Chemical Reaction. Describing love in terms of where it lies in the brain and the particulars of its chemical components isn't terribly exciting to me. The article asserts that "studies around the world confirm that passion usually ends." In other words couples move "from the dopamine-drenched state of romantic love to the relative quiet of an oxytocin-induced attachment. Oxytocin is a hormone that promotes a feeling of connection, bonding. It is released when we hug our long-term spouses, or our children. It is released when a mother nurses her child (p. 45)."

While the chemistry of love may be related to how we feel, *agape* love, the love described in 1 Corinthians 13, is shown not so much by feelings but by certain behaviors. Behind this is the truth, supported by the science described in the National Geographic article, **that acting in loving ways toward our spouse deepens our feelings of love.**

Christian love is far more than feelings, it is about behavior, actions which Paul describes. 1 Corinthians 13 says **Love is patient or suffers long.** The word is *macrothumia*, which can mean long-suffering or slow to anger. Love makes you vulnerable. That's why a lot of people dare not love. That's why a lot of people will not commit themselves. That's why a lot of people want to enjoy eros without any sense of

commitment at all. They are not prepared to be vulnerable. They know that as soon as they become vulnerable, they will probably get hurt. The simple fact is this: in any loving relationship, you open yourself to get hurt. You give of yourself, but the other person may not give in return as you've expected. You may find yourself giving more than you felt you ought to give, compared to what they give. Or you may find your gift is abused. All kinds of things can go wrong. How long to be patient or is something to be watched with tremendous sensibility and care. God did not expect people to be destroyed, but he does expect people in the power of the Holy Spirit to love with patient, long-suffering.

In other words, **Think Long Term**. Some people enter marriage with the same mindset as they have when buying a car. You know when you buy a car you're only going to have it for a few years and then you're going to trade it or sell it and get a new one. That is not the mindset to have in a marriage. A strong marriage requires a long term sense of commitment to having the best possible relationship and helping the other person to grow and develop while being patient with each other.

Love is kind. A generosity of spirit in marriage works wonders. Very often there's a cramped, crabby attitude in marriages. People are not generous with their praise or time or encouragement. Some people simply expect their spouse to have a meal ready, sit down to eat, and never even say thank you or do the dishes. They're not even close to being kind or generous in attitude. Generosity of spirit comes when we begin to be concerned about the well being of the other person. Kindness is something that can slip in marriages and families over time to the point that strangers are treated with more kindness than one's spouse or children. Love is kind means we act with kindness toward the people we love.

I find it very interesting that after only two positive statements of what agape love IS (patient and kind) 1 Corinthians lists a bunch of things that agape love is NOT. "**Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.**

It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

it does not rejoice in wrongdoing."

Many people have "to -do lists" some people's lists are a lot more detailed than others. These verses are a "do not do list" for a strong marriage. **All these negative behaviors can trace their root back to a greater concern for our selves than for the well being of our spouse.** We are envious of someone who has something we want. We boast

when we feel insecure to justify ourselves and make ourselves feel better. Arrogance and rudeness, insisting on getting our own way are basically selfish, me-focused behaviors. Getting irritable or resentful when we don't get our way or when we get hurt; rejoicing when someone else does something wrong and never letting them forget it – these things will take the joy and love right out of a marriage.

Practically and positively speaking, a way to counter many of these negative behaviors is, **Don't Turn Every Decision into a Battle for Control.**

For example, some people seem to have a definite preference for whether or not the toilet paper or paper towels come off from the back or the front of the roll or whether a tube of toothpaste should be thoughtlessly squeezed from the middle or methodically worked up from the bottom always moving the toothpaste toward the opening so it comes out properly. In the great scheme of life these things are unimportant and not worth getting worked up about. And if you don't care and the other person does, do it the way they want it! Rather than fighting to get our own way at all costs in everything, it is far wiser to see your spouse as an ally and friend so get on the same side of the issue and work to find a solution. If your spouse likes randomly squeezing the tube of toothpaste, don't be arrogant or rude; see it as an opportunity to bring order to that tube of toothpaste. The problem with turning every decision into a battle is that even when we win battles someone else has to lose. Any one who studies war knows that those who lose wars often harbor anger, bitterness, and resentment that eventually erupts into new conflicts. The same is true in marriage.

In addition to *not* behaving in some of these negative, selfish ways that erode a marriage, what can a person do who wants to tune up and improve his or her marriage? In addition to understanding and practicing agape love that seeks the good of our spouse at all times, I want to quickly suggest a few last things.

Keep Learning About Marriage and Relationships.

If we stop learning in any area of our life we are in trouble; that includes in our most important relationships. You wouldn't want to go to a doctor who had not read an article or gone to a seminar in the last 25 years. There has never been more information out about marriage, relationships, communication, how to love someone, men, women etc. Read a good book, go to seminar, talk to a counselor or coach, keep on learning. People say, "I have no time." Let me say this sensitively and pastorally – nonsense. Any one who has a CD or tape player in their car or who listens to music or talk radio while they

work has time to keep learning, you simply have to choose what you will listen to. Get some material that will build your marriage and your life and make the most of your time.

Express love in the love languages or ways your loved one most appreciates. We all need to give and receive love in different ways, for example through words of affirmation, quality time, acts of service, physical touch, and gifts. While we all need to give and receive love appropriately in these different ways, most of us tend to have one or two ways that are most meaningful for us. Another way of putting it is some of us feel loved most when we see it in actions, others when we hear it in words, and others when we feel it through touch. In the musical *My Fair Lady*, pathetic love-sick, Freddy Eynsford-Hill can't get through to Eliza Doolittle because he is using words and Eliza is looking for love that is expressed in any way but words because that is all she deals with Professor Henry Higgins. (Run clip of Show Me, from My Fair Lady)

Freddy:

Speak and the world is full of singing,
And I'm winging
higher than the birds.
Touch and my heart begins to crumble,
The heaven's tumble,
darling, and I'm...

Eliza:

Words! Words! Words! I'm so sick of words!
I get words all day through;
First from him, now from you!
Is that all you blighters can do?

Don't talk of stars
burning above;
If you're in love,
Show me!

Tell me no dreams

filled with desire.

If you're on fire,

Show me!

Here we are together in the middle of the night!

Don't talk of spring! Just hold me tight!

Anyone who's ever been in love'll tell you that

This is no time for a chat!

Haven't your lips

longed for my touch?

Don't say how much,

Show me! Show me!

Don't talk of love

lasting through time.

Make me no undying vow.

Show me now!

Sing me no song!

Read me no rhyme!

Don't waste my time,

Show me!

Don't talk of June,

Don't talk of fall!

Don't talk at all!

Show me!

Never do I ever want to hear another word.

There isn't one I haven't heard.

Here we are together in what ought to be a dream;

Say one more word and I'll scream!

Haven't your arms
hungered for mine?
Please don't *expl'ine*,
Show me! Show me!

Don't wait until
wrinkles and lines
Pop out all over my brow,
Show me now!

Poor Freddy, he just doesn't get it yet. If you don't know or haven't figured out your spouse's primary love language, by all means, ask and pay attention!

Finally, **Treat your spouse like a teammate, not an opponent.**

Keep on pursuing each other in agape love. Think of ways each day and week that you can give joy to each other. Try to out serve each other and don't keep score in your head. Love needs to be nourished and nurtured. The decision to love must be made. *Agape* love, remember, is a decision. If you ever have trouble loving your spouse because of what he or she has done or hasn't done, is or isn't, always remember God's love for you despite what you did or didn't do - what you were or what you weren't. Remember that model.

If you are old enough to drive and you have a sticker on your windshield reminding you about the next time to change your oil, I encourage you every time you see that sticker to ask yourself, "**What preventive maintenance, what intentional care and time am I giving to my marriage, to my family, to my most important friendships and relationships in life?**" And whenever you get your oil changed, mentally drain out the negative, selfish behaviors that accumulate over time and let them go. Then think about ways you can invigorate and infuse your most precious relationships with agape, self-giving love.