A few years ago, there was a commercial by Verizon wireless to promote their cellular service as the best in the market. The commercial was straightforward, just a guy walking around from place to place, talking into his cellphone, and asking, “Can you hear me now?” He was making the point that he had a good cellular reception wherever he went. (Watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPwPo-IAQ-E>)

Most people today use cell phones and they know what it is to have lousy reception when talking with someone over the phone. Having an on and off cellular reception when talking with someone over the phone is annoying. It makes it very difficult to have a conversation and communicate effectively, hence the question, “Can you hear me now?”

What about us? How are our communication skills? This is a critical ability in life, that is, to communicate with others. Good communication is the basis for any healthy community and relationship.

This is true because communication affects us in ways we often don’t realize. Throughout our lives, we get into conflicts with our family members, friends, and work colleagues because we fail at communication—both talking and listening. We say mean things when we are upset because we don’t know how to express our emotions and thoughts. Sometimes we even say things we don’t mean, only to regret it later when the person we are arguing with feels really hurt. And some other times, we simply shut down and completely ignore the other side. As a result, poor communication can leave us feeling frustrated, upset, distant, confused, and more.

There is a character in the film Encanto that experienced rejection due to poor communication. His family, for years, prohibited talking about him. They didn’t like what he had to say because they feared what it might mean. However, it was not that they didn’t like him; instead, what he said made them uncomfortable because it challenged their expectations and assumptions of what life should be.

You do know who I am talking about, right? The one that shall not be named and is not Lord Voldemort. I am talking about Bruno.

Before we go any further, let’s review the Encanto movie to set the context.

The movie’s main plot is about Abuela Alma fleeing her home as a refugee with her husband Pedro and their three babies. Pedro ended up sacrificing himself to protect and save his family. Abuela Alma kept deep in her heart the pain and trauma of losing the love of her life and raised her triplets as a single mother. However, Abuela received a special gift, a magical candle that miraculously provided them with a new home and kept them safe by raising mountains around them. When her three children turned five years old, each received a supernatural gift or ability. Julieta received the gift of healing, Pepa the gift to control the weather, and Bruno the gift of foresight. As the family expanded, the grandchildren also received their own gifts, except for Mirabel.

The magic candle seemed to be the primary source of family unity, stability, and happiness. Emphases on “seemed” because emotional pressure, division, and unhappiness were brewing under the surface (just as with Luisa). For years, Abuela Alma thought that without the magic candle, her family wouldn’t have a future. Thus, without realizing it, she put the magic before her familia.

Why would she do that? We have to understand that Abuela Alma was carrying a heavy burden of grief and fear, and all she wanted was to keep her familia safe. Nevertheless, she ended up oppressing them with duty, which was meant to keep the magic strong.

But this was a terrible mistake by Abuela Alma. As she prioritized the safety of the magic candle over her family’s needs and well-being, their casita started to crack.

This is when Bruno comes in. Bruno saw in a vision the destruction of their casita. At the time, he did not understand its meaning, he only saw a crumbling casita, and when he tried to warn them, Abuela Alma shut him down and prohibited him from ever talking about it again. But as the vision expanded, he noticed someone he knew there: Mirabel.

Here is the moment in the movie when Mirabel finds Bruno living between the walls of their casita and how he explains to her the vision: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PM3kpaxEw4>

As you can see, Bruno’s vision included a cracked, crumbling down casita and Mirabel standing in front of it, perhaps implying she was the cause of the calamity. Bruno knew that if people had seen this part of his vision, they would have been inclined to blame her too, and she would have suffered the same rejection he did. Bruno couldn’t bear the thought of anything near of what happened to him happening to his niece Mirabel.

For this, if you noticed, after Bruno showed Mirabel the vision, she said to him, “You left to protect me.” He ultimately went into self-exile to protect Mirabel from being ostracized and treated the same way he was treated.

This is what a family without good and healthy communication looks like. They are afraid of expressing their emotions and thoughts because they know they will be rejected, judged, or worse, ignored. The image of the casita crumbling down represented what was happening to each member of the Madrigal family. And Bruno and Mirabel are examples of what happens to the people we love when we don’t care about listening and talking to them. If what only matters is the illusion of being a perfect family before the eyes of the public, then it is certain that the only perfect thing coming their way is a recipe for disaster.

In his book, Caring Enough To Hear And Be Heard, David Augsburger explains this,

“Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person they are almost indistinguishable. To say something you value deeply to another and to have him or her value it equally by listening to it carefully and appreciatively is the most universal way of exchanging social interest or demonstrating affection.”

“Being heard is so close to being loved.” That is a powerful statement. Perhaps that is why God encourages us to pray often. For example, consider these passages about prayer,

“Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always.” (1 Chronicles 16:11)

“The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.” (Psalms 145:18)

“Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.” (Jeremiah 29:12)

“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” (Romans 12:12)

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

In each of these passages and many others we find in the Bible, it is evident that God wants us to have good and healthy communication with him. So he speaks to us and he listens to us. For this reason, praying and reading the Bible is a wonderful way to communicate with God because it brings us together, provides intimacy, fosters trust, and nurtures the relationship.

The same is true with any other relationship in our lives. If stopping talking and listening to God makes us vulnerable to temptations, clouds our judgment, and dashes our hope, imagine what happens when we stop talking and listening to one another. Not talking about feelings, emotions, trauma, or any taboo subject does not make the issues go away; it just makes them more painful.

Here is the issue we see with Abuela Alma and Bruno that reflects what happens in our lives, too: Poor and unhealthy communication is the number one cause of problems in all interpersonal relationships. The magic of the candle was not dying because of Bruno’s vision; how Bruno was treated when he tried to warn his family is why the magic candle went extinct.

If we apply the same concept to our relationships, we will understand that the root of much of our suffering is a lack of healthy communication.

So, what do we do? What does God say about communication in a relationship? The apostle James in 1:19-20 tells us, “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.” This goes hand in hand with what Jesus said in Matthew 7:12, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.” In both cases, the message is the same: Treat each other as you would wish to be treated.

This is a powerful principle to apply to any relationship. Think about it: How do you respond to nagging, shouting, or being spoken to in an unkind way? Most people don’t respond to angry, hurtful communication with happiness or calmness. Or how many times have you waited impatiently for someone to finish speaking so that you can make your own point? (“You mean like right now?” No, not like right now, of course.)

The reality is that we are often more eager to let others know what we think than listen to what they say. However, how would we know what to say if we don’t know what are the hopes, fears, and feelings of others because we don’t care about listening to them?

Here is what we need to do: pay attention to how we talk and listen to one another. Everyone carries some grief and trauma in their lives. If we care about the well-being of our family and ourselves, we will do what Jesus says, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Thankfully, this is what happened at the end of Encanto. Watch this: <https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=abuela+alma+and+mirable+by+the+river>

This is one of the most moving moments in the film. Mirabel had run away after lashing out at Abuela Alma, telling her that the downfall of the casita and the family’s dying powers were because of her because no one would be good enough for her. But now, by the river, Abuela Alma comes to find her sharing the grief and trauma she carried with her. Finally, Mirabel understood Abuela’s pain and suffering at raising her three kids after losing her husband and home. That is when the two listened to one another and helped each other heal.

The power of healthy, honest, and vulnerable communication does extraordinary things. In the end, the real miracle was not the strength, the ability to communicate with animals, or shapeshifting. As the last song reveals, the miracle is all of them coming together, loving each other, and embracing their true selves, without reservations and unconditionally. And that only happens when we talk and listen to one another.

The good news and invitation are that God loves you because God created you. So, be rooted in God’s love. And then also realize that just as you are loved, so are those around you. So, be kind and patient to one another. Respect and value each other. And don’t forget to listen to understand.