

Don't gossip! Sermon: Pentecost 18A Proper 19 Fr.Hugh. SG.

Text: Romans 14:5-12 & Matthew 18:21-35

Aim: To increase spirit of relationship building

+++++

A man applied to be the campaign manager for one of the two leading parties in the nation.

He soon got a call from the Party's nominee himself, who said:

“I have your resume right here in front of me.

I think it's full of exaggerations, half-truths, distortions and lies. How soon can you start?”

Most of us are saddened to see political campaigns take a negative turn. The media definitely does not help.

It is very distasteful to see the shift in emphasis in the last few elections towards negative innuendo and rumored reports.

On the instructions of the Bishop four clergymen joined a support group. The group leader said it would be helpful if each of them shared about an area of difficulty in their life.

One said:

“Well I have a problem with drinking.

When noone’s looking I help myself to another shot of vodka and I’m often three sheets to the wind before lunchtime.”

The next said,

“I have a problem with kleptomania. Sometimes I shoplift.”

The third said,

“I have a terrible temper and I sometimes use the foulest language with my wife or my secretary.”

The fourth said:

“I have an uncontrollable urge to gossip – and I can’t wait to get out of here and get on the phone.”

Paul in his letter to the Romans asks,

“Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?

When Jesus was asked how often should you forgive? He replied: “not just seven times, but seventy times seven times.”

What do people do when they won't forgive?

They stew. They stew and they gossip.

They try to get other people to agree with them.

The more people they can get to go into agreement with them the better. But it can't make them right.

Gossip is destructive and it carries a very high price.

It causes disruption and division in the spiritual community of the church. It is the quickest way to ruin a church and to undermine the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

It also keeps other people away from Church; and it might well mean that they never have a chance to come to know God themselves. After all, why would someone want to go to a Church, if the people they know who do go to church, continually gossip and backbite?

Now of course, probably no-one here ever gossips; so true to the spirit of gossip, I'll just talk about people who do gossip, while they're not here to hear what I'm saying about them.

Who doesn't remember the saying:

“Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me”? But that's just not true, is it?

Who hasn't at some point been deeply hurt by something someone said about us?

Don't we feel hurt and angry when we find out that our so-called friends have been talking about us behind our backs?

Some of the worst wounds we've received in life, with the longest lingering pain, have been verbally inflicted.

It can be extremely painful to be cut by a tongue with surgical precision.

Gossip can sometimes have the appearance of being harmless. When **other** people engage in gossip it is clearly a most unpleasant thing.

But of course what we do isn't really gossip.

What we do is different!

And that line of reasoning is much of the problem.

Have you ever wondered why the phrase, "I know it's none of my business," is always followed by the word "but...?"

More than once I've walked up to a group of church members who are looking very sheepish, and I've asked them,

"Are you gossiping by any chance?"

One of them inevitably says,

"Oh no. Father, we're just sharing information."

Some people really do like to share as much information as they can. Others like to improve upon that information with rich embellishment when passing it on.

I preached about gossip once in my last parish. - You should have heard what some people said about me after that!

A lot of people, and Christians are no exceptions, begin their gossip very innocently, disguising it as an ever so sincere expression of caring.

“Me gossip? No! I’m just concerned.”

If you’re concerned for someone you pray for them and you ask what you can do to help.

Gossip and slander are poisonous.

One bit of gossip instantly hurts three people. The one being talked about; the one listening; and the one talking.

This same truth was stated long ago in ancient Jewish writings. According to the Talmud:

“The slanderous tongue kills three: The slandered, the slanderer, and the one who hears the slander.”

Gossip is unverified, judgmental rumor.

The more interesting it sounds - the less likely it is to be true.

If someone will gossip to you - they will gossip about you!

There's an old English saying that,

“A dog is a man's best friend –

Because a dog wags his tail, not his tongue.”

In our Prayer Book the Catechism of the Church says:

“My duty to my neighbor is to keep my tongue from evil-speaking, lying and slandering.” My Duty.

It is a great thing to resolve with God's help not to initiate gossip. But we need to do more than not just initiate it.

We need to go one step further and refuse to engage in it, not allowing anyone to seduce us into it, with a:

“Did you know?” “Have you heard?”

- or that Southern favorite:

“I love her to death. Bless her heart! - but let me tell you...”

A lady - we'll call her Angela, not her real name - had a self appointed ministry in the church. Her husband was often out of town on business for several weeks at a time.

Meanwhile, Angela made it her business to monitor everyone else's business. One day she saw the truck of a new member called David parked outside a sleazy bar that offered questionable types of entertainment.

As it happened he was doing electrical repairs for the offices next door to the bar. But that was beside the point – Angela told everyone who'd listen that this new member was an undesirable, lecherous drunk; and not the sort of person who would make a good member of the church.

“After all,” she said, “his truck was there, so he must have been inside.”

David soon got wind of this allegation. He didn't say anything, but that evening after dark he drove over to Angela's house. He parked his truck in front of her house and walked the three miles home, leaving his truck there, all night.

“After all his truck was there, so he must have been...”

How do we handle it when someone tries to draw us into gossip?

By saying: “Wait a minute. I'm not the person you need to speak to about this. Why don't you talk directly to them?”

After a couple of times people will soon discover that you're no fun to gossip with and they won't try to drag you into it.

And if you lose a friend over it, it's a much less expensive way of finding out that they weren't a friend in the first place, than if you'd lent them money.

When I was a new priest in my first parish, I soon got a visit in my office from a woman who had earlier left the church in a fit of pique, but had obviously decided to come over to check out the new rector.

She immediately launched into a scathing attack on the previous rector and the former Senior Warden.

I could feel waves of toxicity coming from this woman.

At first I hoped that after venting for a moment she'd run out of steam, but it soon became apparent that she was just getting started; so I said to her:

“I really don't want to hear you talking about these people like this. If you have a legitimate grievance I'd be willing to listen to you, but I'm not willing to listen to people just being insulted.”

Well she huffed and puffed and made a dramatic exit.

I never saw her again.

But I wondered if she ever paid a visit to my successor, armed with even more venom and with my name added to her list of most terrible people.

Some people make excuses for the foul things they say with a claim of no responsibility:

“I wasn’t thinking when I said that!”

But: “I was thinking viscerously when I said that,” would be more accurate. If you said it, you thought it.

Speech is only thought put into words.

Now some people when they make a commitment to quit gossiping suddenly find that they actually have very little to talk about.

A woman in my previous parish said to me:

“I just don’t know what to say anymore.

I’ve just realized that I gossip nearly all the time.

I don’t have anything to talk about now!”

Yes, that can be quite an adjustment if all of a sudden 90% of your usual conversation is off limits! Then what?

One possibility is of course to say nothing and to rediscover the magic and wonder of silence.

I like what George Eliot wrote:

“Blessed is the person, who, having nothing to say,
refrains from giving lengthy wordy evidence of that fact.”

In the words of the mystic, Meister Eckhart :

“In silence a person can most readily preserve their integrity.”

Or, as Mother Teresa remarked:

“God is the friend of silence.

Trees, flowers and grass grow in silence.

See too how the sun, the moon and the stars move, in silence.”

Alternatively we can look and see “what could I bring to this conversation that would be positive?”

Listen to what St.Paul said:

“Putting away falsehood, let everyone speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart Grace to those who hear.”

We need to do more than not just say anything negative; but to affirmatively speak in a way that is constructive.

Can our ears listen to gossip without our mouths also becoming contaminated?

Can we really lift our voices in praise to God one minute, and gossip unkindly the next?

What a person says originates in their heart and mind.

As Jesus said:

“It is not what goes into a person’s mouth that makes them unclean, but what comes out of a person’s mouth.”

And we are responsible for all of it.

Jesus said:

“I tell you: On the day of judgment, people will have to give an account for every careless word they utter.”

Now that is going to be an awfully long day!

It's not easy, I know. But through the grace of Christ and through the indwelling of His Holy Spirit, we are new people.

Which means we should always live with this question:

“Since I am a new person in Christ, how am I going to govern my conversation?”

God, give me wisdom in my thinking and my speaking.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer.”