

“If You Can’t Say anything Nice...”

May 12, 2019

“STOP IT! In the Name of Love” series – Mother’s Day Sunday

SHOW MEDIA: “Gossip”

“If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.” We’ve heard this. We know it’s true. We want to follow it, and yet we keep hearing it and saying it because we struggle with it - in our homes, our friendships, our workplaces, our community, our world, online, and yes, even in the church!

Binalonan is a town in the Philippines. Some of the local leaders have actually introduced an anti-gossip ordinance to stop gossip. The town mayor says that it’s worse in the summer when people gather underneath shade in the hot sun and start talking about other people. Online presence has made it worse, too, but the goal is to end the rumor mill. If you’re caught, the first offense is a small fine and an afternoon of picking up trash. Apparently, they haven’t had second offenses.

Can you imagine it? Where would you and I be in this community? Are we a part of the problem? In this age of information flying around so quickly - sometimes misinformation - gossip is alive and well. No doubt we’ve heard it, perhaps participated in it, and maybe even been hurt by it. Whenever we share information without facts or pass along rumors about someone else’s private or personal life, that’s gossip. It doesn’t matter if we start it or not; when we participate, we’re part of the problem.

Supposedly it was Alice Roosevelt Longworth who changed the old adage and said, **(SHOW SLIDE)** “If you can’t say anything nice, sit by me.” We know gossip isn’t helpful, and in fact, we know how hurtful it can be. So why do we do it?

Gossip is usually negative and against other people. Maybe we’re seeking to feel better about ourselves or get attention. Maybe we want to avoid talking about ourselves, and, let’s be honest, it’s easier to talk about other people. It’s a way we bond with each other - even talking about someone - maybe sometimes a common enemy - who isn’t a part of the conversation.

So maybe gossip allows us to feel closer to the people we’re gossiping with, but it also gives us a way to say who’s “in” and who’s “out” in community. Gossip moves us to judge others and then create walls between them and us. We give ourselves a free pass to treat others badly.

In the early 1900’s, Charles Stewart is credited with this challenging word about gossip. **SHOW SLIDE:** “Great minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; small minds discuss people.” And gossip can be harmful for the one who participates just as it

can hurt the person we gossip about. Gossip can steer us away from things we need to work on with ourselves and can ruin relationships with others.

Gossip can create a lack of trust between people. Music star Jay-Z offered this response to someone when they shared something they had heard about him. **SHOW SLIDE:** “Don’t tell me what was said about me. Tell my why they were so comfortable to say it to you.” If I’m the recipient of gossip (or perhaps a willing participant), what does it say about me?

Gossip isn’t a new problem, and yet the advent of social media has made it seem like it is. Being able to respond immediately to whatever is happening in our lives and in the world can cause us to be less thoughtful and more immediate in our reactions. It means that we’re sharing information more quickly and sometimes without all the facts, which creates more problems and more anxiety. And gossip creates an atmosphere where more gossip is acceptable.

As we consider what it means to follow Jesus, we’re called to love God and love neighbor. We can find warnings about gossip from the very beginning. In Exodus, as God is trying to form a holy nation among the Israelites, Moses is given the Ten Commandments.

Whether you can name all ten from memory, it’s important to know that the first three are about how we love God. The fourth is the Sabbath commandment, and the last six are about how we love our neighbor. One of them is “do not bear false witness” or, more simply put, “do not lie.” At its root, gossip is lying about someone because we don’t have all the facts. We might have a lot of opinions, but we don’t have the facts.

Warnings about gossip continue throughout the Old Testament, especially in Proverbs. Like chapter 18: “The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a person’s inmost parts.” Gossip sticks and stays - and can easily destroy relationships and reputations. Gossip can spread hate and fear and create an atmosphere of mistrust.

The New Testament letters are full of warnings against gossip. It’s included on virtually every list of sinful behaviors to avoid, but we easily overlook it. It seems that gossip has been “the most ignored sin.”

The short Book of James is clear that taming the tongue is a problem and a need among the early Christian community. Nothing has changed. James calls for a “tight rein” on the tongue and says that it’s crucial to our witness in the world. Our speech - both what comes out of our mouths and what we write - is a reflection of who we are. And if we seek to follow Jesus, it’s offering the world a reflection of who we believe him to be.

AJ Jacobs is a writer who sought to follow Scripture as literally as possible for a year. His experience of trying to “keep his tongue from evil” turned out to be more difficult than he thought, especially because there are more than 20 passages that condemn gossip, even clearly saying that you shouldn’t go around as a gossip among your people. In his words, “all sniping, snarkiness, disparaging, mocking, scoffing, and scorning is off-limits.”

One pastor Jacobs interviewed described gossip as verbal pollution, and Jacobs began to visualize it as a dark cloud over himself and others. “Once you’ve belched it out, you can’t take it back.” I would add that once we post it, send it, tweet it, or anything else, we can’t take it back.

At the root of it, the spiritual problem with gossip is that it dishonors others. When we gossip and spread rumors, we’re not honoring one another. We’re not respecting one another. We’re not loving one another.

And gossip breaks down community. God seeks to build a community of faith where there is trust and care. If we’re called to love God and love neighbor, gossip works against that goal every time. Even if our intentions are good - like sharing a prayer request - we must make sure we have permission. Is it mine to share? Is it OK to share this?

I’ve been convicted as I’ve thought about my own witness as a Christian and how I participate in gossip in my family, friendships, and even in my work with colleagues. Even John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, warned not to speak about someone if he or she isn’t there to defend themselves. But how many times do we do that?

Some experts say that more than half of our conversations are about someone who isn’t a part of the conversation. Now maybe that’s not all technically gossip, but perhaps the first question we ask if we’re not sure is, “why are you telling me this?” And maybe we ask ourselves, “would this hurt someone if they heard it?”

Gossip needs people to listen in order to keep going. If we want to stop it, then we have some power by not participating. But that requires self-discipline and intentionality. We have to make a choice and work at it. We have to be clear with people around us that we don’t want to hear it.

So what do we do? How do we stop gossip in the name of love - to love God and love neighbor? J. John, an Anglican speaker and author, offers useful questions to figure out whether something is gossip or a justified interest in another.

1. Is it true? Others would add, Is it kind? Is it necessary?
2. Will it benefit anybody knowing this? Is it important to share?

And even if the answer to both of those questions is “yes,” here are two more questions:

3. Would I be willing to put my name to it — to be known to all as its source? Is it mine to share?

4. Would I be willing to say it to the person's face in a public setting?

If not, then even if you might be justified in talking to the person about it, you probably shouldn't talk to others about it.

SHOW SLIDE: "A lot of problems in this world would disappear if we talked with each other instead of about each other."

Brothers and sisters, we're called into community with each other - a community of faith whose foundation is Jesus, the Risen Christ, who comes that all might have abundant life and hope and peace and joy. Our witness matters, and how we live in the world matters. How we speak, how we communicate, how we act and interact with others - it all matters.

We're not called to share gossip; we're called to share the Gospel - the Good News of Jesus Christ - with everyone we encounter. Remember Jesus told us to go and keep going - making disciples for the transformation of the world. How will our lives be transformed if we stop gossip - stop talking about each other - and instead share the Gospel - talk with each other, build community, pray for each other, and build real relationships that help us to grow in God's grace?

God, help us. Thanks be to God. AMEN.

Let us pray...PRAYERS of the PEOPLE & the LORD'S PRAYER