

THE BLOOD SPORT OF GOSSIP

A notice hangs on the bulletin board in an office I know, and it says: “This Dept. requires no Physical Fitness Program: Everyone gets enough exercise jumping to conclusions, flying off the handle, running down the boss, knifing friends in the back, dodging responsibility & pushing their luck.” I have not discovered if it represents what is going on in this business, but its sarcasm accentuates a universal evil, gossip.

Charles Dickens wrote that poverty and ignorance were the spawn that would bring civilization down. Will Rogers added one more: “all the things we know that ain’t so.” That’s what is behind the great human pastime of gossip. It should give us long pause that tabloids hugely outsell newspapers in our country.

Lent, a season to renew our spiritual fitness program, is a good time to practice un-gossiping. This amounts to more than just avoiding passing on rumors, lies, or truths that bite. It means modifying our motives in relating to people.

Unfortunately, gossiping for many people is an addiction. They are hooked on the rush they get from cruelty masquerading as news. Running others down is intrinsically thrilling. Unable to say something nasty face to face, they get hooked on sneaking around twittering. So, if someone gossips to you, you may be sure they will gossip about you.

Gossip is self-justifying. While everyone *says* they don’t like it, all of us have known its pleasures. It’s invigorating blood sport. Someone else is getting theirs! Even if we are not junkies, it makes us feel important to share in juicy rumors. It makes us look like insiders, members of a privileged class. Few things are sweeter on the tongue than “Did you know...?”

Gossip is evil not just because we are hurting someone else’s good name and reputation. It is self-destructive. It’s one of the time-bombs of hypocrisy.

The chief meaning of hypocrisy is creating the impression of virtue to deceive others about one’s actions or character. But, as Hubert van Zeller reminds us, the deeper meaning is lying to oneself, and then forcing belief in the lie. It’s hypocrites who believe “all those things we know that ain’t so.” One of the reasons for gossiping is the reinforcement hypocrisy gets if a lie is accepted as gospel. If enough people believe the gossip, it must be true.

Gossip is a form of sloth as well as dishonesty. It is easier to talk than to keep silent, even if you are not sure of the truth. As James says in his epistle, we have tamed all manner of nature’s giants, but we can’t tame the little tongue. Abe Lincoln addressed the issue more colorfully. It is better, he said, to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool, than to open it and remove all doubt. It may be better, but the reason so many of us repeatedly eliminate doubt is that keeping our mouth shut is so hard.

The problem of gossip is really a question of motives. We must carefully explore why we are so ready and willing to pass on unexamined information about others. Why are we so careless about the truth? And if something is true, why are we in a greater hurry to pass on truth that hurts?

As noted above, the least culpable answer is that we are just looking for a break, for relief. When you feel bad, complain and blame. A friend of mine calls this “recreational bitching.” Suffering and loneliness, which are no sins, are often the sources of grumpy gossip. It may lead to little or no harm, and let us pray that by God’s grace it does not. But let us also be mindful that, like wildfire, all gossip is dangerous.

More reprehensible motives may lie just outside our awareness. We must hunt for them, with the aid of our conscience. Are we trying to discount our own inadequacies and weakness, our jealousies and self-hatred, or our failures and adversities, by magnifying those of others? And in magnifying others faults or misfortunes are we finding an elephant in the room that isn’t there?

A more sinister motive for gossip is the desire to “create an impression.” We don’t actually want, say, to become loving, a self-change which may require much prayer, sacrifice, and discipline. But we want to be thought of as loving. So we give the impression that we are commenting on poor

so-and-so's troubles because we care, we're concerned. We create the perception that we possess virtues we haven't achieved. The hypocrisy is intentional. But He who made the ear hears.

There is only one solution to gossip: love the truth in order to build up love of your neighbor. As the truth becomes more important to you, so gossip begins to fall away like scales from your eyes. You cannot tell a lie without knowing it. That is why all gossip makes us feel either guilty or dirty. When knowing the truth becomes a passion, lying becomes painful. And so does passing on a truth that wounds. Mature love measures harm by the pain it feels. We call that compassion.

We must also stop listening to gossip. It becomes a matter of mental and spiritual hygiene. But not listening to gossip is almost as hard as bridling the tongue. It begins with the intention to evaluate what you hear. You must stop and think. You must ask yourself if what you are being told is true. You must make an unhurried judgment, not about others, but about the information you hear: will this hurt or heal?

And you may have to confront a gossip. That is the hardest thing of all, to question the truth and the harm of what is being said publicly, even when it seems only a small matter. A word of gossip cannot be undone, but it can be stopped in its tracks. Not just the truth, but unearthing all those things we know that ain't so, sets us free.

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