

Nathan Brown
 "When Gossip Is A Good Thing"
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 West Side Christian Church

James 3:1-12

In the recent film *Doubt*, Phillip Seymour Hoffman plays a Catholic priest by the name of Father Flynn, who is accused by a nun of molesting a child. Soon after being accused, Father Flynn preaches a sermon on gossip to his congregation. As a part of the sermon, Father Flynn tells this story:

"A woman was gossiping with a friend about a man she hardly knew - I know none of you have ever done this - that night she had a dream. A great hand appeared over her and pointed down at her. She was immediately seized with an overwhelming sense of guilt. The next day she went to confession. She got the old parish priest, Father O'Rourke, and she told him the whole thing."

"Is gossiping a sin?" she asked the old man. "Was that the hand of God Almighty pointing a finger at me? Should I be asking your absolution? Father, tell me, have I done something wrong?"

(Irish Brogue)

'Yes!' Father O'Rourke answered her. 'Yes, you ignorant, badly brought up female! You have borne false witness against your neighbor, you have played fast and loose with his reputation, and you should be heartily ashamed!'

So the woman said she was sorry and asked for forgiveness.

'Not so fast!' says O'Rourke. 'I want you to go home, take a pillow up on your roof, cut it open with a knife, and return here to me!'

So the woman went home, took a pillow off her bed, a knife from the drawer, went up the fire escape to the roof, and stabbed the pillow. Then she went back to the old parish priest as instructed.

'Did you gut the pillow with the knife?' he says.

'Yes, Father.'

'And what was the result?'

'Feathers,' she said.

'Feathers?' he repeated.

'Feathers everywhere, Father!'

'Now I want you to go back and gather up every last feather that flew out on the wind!'

'Well,' she said, 'it can't be done. I don't know where they went. The wind took

them all over.’
 ‘And that,’ said Father O’Rourke, ‘is GOSSIP!’

I think this morning’s New Testament reading from James is at least, in part, about gossip. James says that the tongue can be used for good and the tongue can be used for evil. He writes, “With our tongues we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.”

One of the ways that we use our tongue for cursing others is through gossip. The point Father O’Rourke makes in this story is a good one. We must be careful what we say because once gossip begins, there is no stopping it. And let’s face it, we love to gossip! To quote the great theologian Oscar Wilde, "If you can’t say something good about someone, come over here and sit next to me."

We cannot help but stand in the check-out line of the grocery store without gazing to the gossip magazines about what is happening with Jon, Kate and their plus eight, Brad and Angelina’s newest adopted child, or Brittany Spear’s latest boyfriend. In fact, I would argue that there is not much difference between what we read in People Magazine vs. what we read in the Virginian Pilot anymore. Our news has even become more about opinion than it has about objectivity. We are more concerned with the private affairs of our President than the policies of his office. Gossip sells. We eat it up!

And so, gossip is a fundamental part of humanity. It is a part of every culture, society, and community. It is as basic to being human as breathing. It is a part of each aspect of our lives: our families, our workplace, and even our church.

However, while gossip is ubiquitous and universal, we still tend to have a pretty dim view of it. The traditional way of understanding gossip is that it is not a very Christian practice. As James says, it can “light a small fire that sets ablaze a whole forest. And when the tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.”

The Talmud tells the story of a king who gave his court jesters, his two court clowns, an unusual assignment. The king ordered one jester to bring him back the best thing in the world. The second jester was ordered to bring the king the worst thing in the world. Both jesters returned quickly, each with a small package in hand.

The first jester opened his first, bowing low: "Behold, Your Majesty, the best thing in the world." It was a tongue. The second jester opened his container, saying, "Behold, Your Majesty, the worst thing in the world." Once again, it was a tongue.

The point of this story is the same point that James ultimately makes in our reading this morning. While the tongue can tear down, it can also build up. What we say about one another does not have to be just idle talk or rumor. What we say about each

other, even when it is private or personal, even when it is gossip, can be informative and helpful.

I read an article this week by Will Willimon entitled, "Gossip As An Ethical Activity." The point Willimon makes is that gossip does not have to be only about tearing down. In fact, there are types of gossip that build up. And I tend to agree with Willimon. And I am indebted to Willimon and his article for the argument I am about to make: that I think James would say that sometimes gossip can be a blessing and sometimes gossip can be a curse.

Patricia Meyer Spacks, author of *Gossip*, contends that talking about the personal lives of others need not be wholly immoral. Gossip can be a moral part of everyday life. Spacks says that gossip, at its best, is a means whereby we attempt to figure out who we are and how we ought to live. In other words, my talk about others is not always an attempt to build them up or tear them down but rather, to make sense out of myself.

When Ralph Abernathy wrote his biography on Martin Luther King, Jr., including in this biography King's unfaithfulness to his marriage vows, was this slander or a truthful depiction of one aspect of a life? When Abernathy implied that King's extra-marital activities were the result of his spouse's inadequacy, then, in my opinion, he fell into slander.

On the other hand, I remember the first time I read one of Martin Luther King's biographies by Michael Eric Dyson entitled, "I May Not Get There With You." Dyson wrote candidly about the sins of King's past. And while Dyson did not give justification for King's behavior, he wrote about the unbelievable stresses of King's life, all those who were pulling at King. So many causes were demanding King's attention that he was exhausted, incoherent and personally, ethically worn down and confused.

"If that could happen to a great Christian like Martin," I thought, "just imagine what that sort of stress could do to a person like me." The personal and private affairs of another provoked deep, personal reflection. I was reading, not so much about King as about myself.

In the church, I think we can take gossip even one step further than being merely a practice whereby we learn more about ourselves. Gossip is particularly important for the church because gossip, when done well, can get to the most fundamental part of our faith: Jesus' command to love God and our neighbor.

Many times, as a pastor, I have taken pastoral initiative with people, making a phone call, knocking on a front door and saying, "Joe, Joan, I hear you're having some problems." Sometimes they say, "Oh, we see that the church rumor mill has been hard at work" -- congregational gossip making its nasty intrusion into their personal lives. "Call it gossip if you will," I counter, "but I heard this as the genuine concern of some fellow Christians who care about you and are not sure how to show their care." More often than

not, the information is accurate and the couple is grateful that we have made their troubles our own.

Christians are members of a family, siblings by virtue of baptism who pledge to make our stories available to one another out of conviction that we become better people in the process. In baptism we "go public" with our lives, offering it to the familial scrutiny of others, taking responsibility for the lives of others.

Indeed, I've decided that one of the greatest and most indefensible burdens we keep in families are secrets. Why do we keep so many? We need to re-examine the whole notion of privacy and confidentiality in ministry. One can understand why a physician or a mental health worker ought to practice confidentiality. After all, it is a risky business to tell our deep secrets to perfect strangers. But that is not our situation in the church.

We are busy creating a community of trust. In a church, as in a marriage, we aspire to be the sort of people who know a great deal of very personal information about one another without using that information to destroy one another. Indeed, one of the primary goals of pastoral care ought to be encouraging private pain to "go public" as soon as possible. That does not mean that I will divulge something a parishioner has said to me in confidence. It does mean that I help the troubled individual to see that the main resource for pastoral care in the church is the whole church.

Now, I am not going to say that confidentiality is not, at times, necessary. It is. We all have those things going on in our lives that do not need to be divulged to every person we know.

However, if a woman admits to me that her adult son is an alcoholic. She tells me not to tell anyone in the church because "I know how they would look down on me." I have two problems with her request. First, two-thirds of the congregation already knows her son is an alcoholic. A congregation that doesn't know intimate information about one another isn't much of a church. Second, the dozen or so members of the church who are parents of alcoholic children could be her primary paths to care.

As her pastor, I must help her to see that her deep, unmentionable secret is, in the eyes of faith, a church problem, an invitation to renew her baptism and possibly that of her son as well by allowing her brothers and sisters in Christ to minister to their need. If she can do that, then she may enable her brothers and sisters in Christ to claim their baptismal commission to be siblings in Christ and priests to one another rather than detached strangers or consumers of individual therapy.

Perhaps one of my responsibilities, as your pastor, is not to think of myself as "above" such mundane conversations as gossip or as a prohibitor of gossip, but rather as one who helps a congregation to gossip well.

For example, old gossip is uninteresting because it is old information. Who wants to be told a secret that everyone already knows? Old gossip may also be immoral, a means of locking another person in the past, tying a person to a past sin in a way that is anything but Christian. Forgiveness means, in great part, that the forgiven sin is no longer the subject of continued conversation.

It is often difficult to decide what constitutes malicious gossip in a society that handles its lack of cohesive bonds by exaggerating its notions of individual privacy. Congregations can help people learn how to know secrets about others without using those secrets to destroy them.

Our society makes strangers of us all, gives us the right to privacy without giving us anything to do with it and unjustly separates private and public ethics. The gossip of the church family, however, the talk of siblings by baptism, is sanctified. Gossip, as a church activity without malice, may well be, at its best, a moral part of ordinary people, a primary means of congregational bonding, a source of utterly essential moral data about ourselves, an everyday means of investigating communally what it means to be baptized.¹

Next time you gossip, think of James' words in our reading this morning: "With our tongues we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing." Is your gossip blessing or cursing?

Amen.

¹ Willimon, William. *The Christian Century*. "Gossip as an Ethical Activity." October 31, 1991. Pgs. 994-996.