

If You Can't Say Something Nice

Acts 9:26-31; James 3:1-12

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Both of our scripture lessons this morning emphasize the power of the spoken word. I first heard the story of Barnabas and Paul when I was just a little girl, and it made a huge impact on me. I remember how important it was that Barnabas spoke-up for Paul. He had the courage to say something nice, something affirming; that was absolutely true, even while surrounded by the disciple's misinformation and fear. Barnabas' words were so important that they served to change the entire course of the early church. For if he hadn't spoken-up, Paul might never have journeyed as a missionary throughout Asia Minor and the Mediterranean. Words have that much power.

Today's story takes place soon after Paul's Damascus Road experience, when he was struck blind. Up to that point, he had been known as Saul, a Jewish religious zealot who was a vicious persecutor of the early Christians.

But three days after losing his sight, when the scales fell from his eyes, Luke tells us that Saul saw a vision of Christ and heard Christ's voice directing him to turn from his *old* ways of to *The Way*.

We can imagine how the followers of Jesus reacted when the newly converted Paul asked to join up with them in spreading the Good News. The text says it plain and simple: "the disciples were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was truly one-of-them." Their skepticism is understandable, isn't it?

It would have been easy for Barnabas to go along with the disciples' consensus, and do his level best to keep Paul out of the church. But he didn't. Instead, he went against the attitudes of the others; he spoke up and defended Paul. Barnabas put in a good word for him. To go against the crowd must have taken a lot of self-confidence, certainty, and courage.

If Barnabas had remained silent, the church would have been without Paul, its first and foremost theologian and evangelist.

The encouragement Barnabas gave is a strong contrast to all the criticism, contentiousness and cynicism we hear today. Now I'm not referring to the healthy debates over public policy or theology. These have their place and are marks of a strong democratic society or church.

Instead, I'm referring to a kind of *hypercritical* attitude that threatens to infect our relationships at every level - from marriages and family life to the workplace, schools, the arts and entertainment industry, public institutions and political life. Our culture is filled with criticism and contention - not to mention outright lies. We seem to be losing our ability - individually and collectively - to appreciate, to praise, value, and encourage.

I'm certainly aware of how easy it is to fall into the habit of saying something (usually under the guise of being humorous,) that is demeaning. I'm not proud of all that I hear coming out of my mouth; like most people, I have work to do with my speech.

The problem does exist within each of us, but also within the culture as a whole. Our confrontational, tear-down way of doing business is described in a book called *The Argument Culture* written by Deborah Tannen, the popular communication experts at Georgetown University. Tannen is concerned about the increasing combativeness because she thinks it is undermining our democracy. It's not honest disagreement and debate, but rather that kind of autopilot, reactive, critical attitude that finds fault everywhere - except with one's own opinions and actions. These vituperative attacks, Tannen says,

“confuse and distract from real issues,
undermine citizens' respect for, and connection to, our leaders
and country,
and they stir up animosities that make it harder for people to work together solving
problems and accomplishing goals.”

When we become determined to pursue truth by setting up a fight between two sides (like Christianity vs. Islam, Blue vs. Red, or Organic vs. Genetically Altered foods), we can expect more fireworks than enlightenment. The truth has more sides than only two. In fact, truth is shaped like a crystal with *many* sides and perspectives. Important topics have complexity; they must be viewed with open minds and eyes - in the light, from a variety of angles.

Picking sides and digging in our heels, and adversarial and antagonistic speech, is destructive to public and private life and diminishes the human spirit.

The ancient Hebrews understood the power words possess, and the ability of words to create or destroy. Genesis tells us that God *spoke* the universe into being. God said, “Let there be light,” and what had been dark nothingness blazed into brilliance.

The creation account reaches its culmination with human beings made in the image of God. Like God, we have the power of speech; a power with potential both to destroy and to create - so we need to choose words carefully. Words can break hearts. Words can build-up or tear-down.

Imagine a little one hearing, “It makes me happy to hear you sing.” Or that same little one hearing, “too bad you can't stay on key.” The first comment builds up the child's confidence and the relationship; the second comment will diminish them.

“Words call forth emotions,” wrote Sigmund Freud, “and they are inevitably how we influence our fellow creatures. Words can give another the greatest happiness or bring about utter despair.”

Look back at your own life. I hope you can remember a time when someone spoke words that embraced you with affirmation, so that you began to think differently about yourself, or you could find new confidence and courage.

I hope you have not encountered too many *discouraging* words. Communication research tells us that it takes 37 positive affirmations to overcome 1 negative remark. Unfortunately, the power of discouraging words far surpasses the power of positive words.

Criticism can be corrosive. Therapists warn that criticism is a major contributor to the break-up of marriages. Indeed, Harville Hendrix - a noted author of books about relationships - believes that there is no such thing as constructive criticism. Hypercritical people are typically pessimistic; they are rarely satisfied because they expect everyone - including themselves - to be better, or even perfect. They are bound to be disappointed, aren't they?!

Criticism alienates people. Continual negative comments eventually make us feel unsafe and cause us to withdraw. It is a misconception that criticism gets people to change, because even if the criticism is valid, it rarely helps. It's more likely that the one being criticized will become stubborn, defensive, or rebellious.

If we would each write down the negative comments we make during the course of a day we might be shocked into taming our tongues. For even though the culture is infected with cynicism and negativity, the road to health begins with each of us.

Paul told Timothy that he should “set the believers an example in speech and in conduct; in love, in faith, and in purity.” If we pay attention to Paul's words, we will become more careful of our speech. We'll avoid careless, hurtful remarks, we will listen more intently and prayerfully to others to understand them rather than to shoot them down.

Our calling is to be encouragers - like Barnabas - to build up the Body of Christ, our neighbors, and our society.

Perhaps you've heard the anonymous *Prayer of an Aging Woman*. Let it become a prayer we take to heart - no matter our years:

Lord, you know better than I know myself that I am growing older, and will some day be old. Keep me from getting talkative, and particularly from the fatal habit of thinking that I must say something on every subject and on every occasion.

Release me from craving to straighten out everybody's affairs. Make me thoughtful but not moody; helpful but not bossy. With my vast store of wisdom, it seems a pity not to use it all, but you know Lord, that I want a few friends at the end. Keep my mind from the recital of endless details - give me wings to come to the point.

I ask for grace enough to listen to the tales of others' pains. But seal my lips on my own aches and pains; they are increasing, and the love of rehearsing them is becoming sweeter as the years go by. Help me to endure them with patience.

I dare not ask for improved memory, but for a growing humility and a lessening cocksureness when my memory seems to clash with the memories of others. Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally it is possible that I may be mistaken.

Keep me reasonably sweet. I do not want to be a saint - some of them are so hard to live with - but a sour old person is one of the crowning words of the devil.

Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places, and talents in unexpected people. And give me, O Lord, the grace to tell them so.

May it be so for you and for me.