

SPEAKING WELL

A man went to his rabbi with a question. "Rabbi," he said, "I understand almost all of the law. I understand the commandment not to kill. I understand the commandment not to steal. What I don't understand is why there is a commandment against slandering the neighbor."

The rabbi looked at the man and said, "I will give you an answer, but first I have a task for you. I would like you to gather a sack of feathers and place a single feather on the doorstep of each house in the village. When you have finished, return for your answer."

The man did as he was told and soon returned to the rabbi to announce that the task was complete. "Now, Rabbi, give me the answer to my question."

"Ah," the rabbi said. "One more thing. I want you to go back and collect all the feathers before I give you the answer."

"But Rabbi," the man protested, "the feathers will be impossible to collect. The wind will have blown them away."

"So it is when we speak ill about our neighbors," the rabbi said. "The words can never be retrieved. They are like feathers in the wind."

There are hundreds and hundreds of commandments in the Bible. We expect murder, rape, and robbery to make God's top ten commandments. But right there, alongside them, as we heard in the reading today from Exodus, is the commandment about the tongue. God wants us to know how extremely important this commandment is.

The Bible has much to say about how we use our tongues. The book of James says, "It takes only a spark to start a forest fire! The tongue is like a spark. It is an evil power that dirties the rest of the body and sets a person's entire life on fire with flames that come from hell, itself. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures can be tamed and have been tamed. But our tongues get out of control. They are restless and evil, and always spreading deadly poison." (James 3:5-8)

One of the books we use in our confirmation class is The Lutheran Handbook. It is a "how-to" book with all kinds of useful information for Christians. It has humorous tips, such as "What to bring to a church potluck" and "How to avoid getting burned at the stake." But it also offers very sound and practical advice, such as "How to pray" and "How to share your faith with someone."

In the chapter on "How to avoid gossip," it says, "Gossip is among the most corrosive forces within a community and should be monitored closely." And then it gives five action steps.

1. Determine whether the conversation at hand qualifies as gossip. Gossip involves one party speaking about a second party to a third party. The person who is the topic of gossip is not a participant in the conversation. The tone of the conversation is often secretive or negative. The facts expressed in a gossip conversation are often unsubstantiated and have been obtained second or third-hand.
2. Recall and heed Titus 3:2 which says, "Speak evil of no one."
3. Interject yourself into the conversation politely. Ask whether the gossip has spoken directly to the person about whom they are talking. If not, politely ask why.
4. Make a statement of fact. Gossip withers in the face of truth. Make an attempt to parse out what is truly known from conjecture and supposition. State aloud that gossip is disrespectful and unfair.
5. Offer an alternative explanation based on fact. Describe other situations that cast the gossiper in a favorable light. Always try to give people the benefit of the doubt.

The chapter goes on to say, "Be aware that there is a fine line between helping and meddling. Pay close attention to your own motivations and the possible outcomes of your action." And remember, "Gossip injures both the gossip and the person who is the subject of rumors."

Why do we spend so much time speaking negatively about one another? Why are we so quick to criticize and tear down one another? Is it because we don't feel good about ourselves? Is it because we are fearful and anxious? Is it because we desperately want to get our own way?

But we already have what we need - and more. Remember, you are a valued child of God! You don't need to grasp for recognition at the expense of someone else. You are worth so much to God that Jesus was willing to suffer and die for you! You don't need to diminish the worth of others by tearing them down.

When you were baptized, God connected you to the Body of Christ and gave you the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the power of God at work in your life. Allow this power to control your tongue so that your tongue builds up the Body of Christ rather than tears it down. God has promised to look out for you, to take care of you, to provide for all of your needs. You don't need to speak harshly about others in order to build yourself up. God will do that.

God has said, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." The catechism explains, "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light."

May God help us to speak well.