

McCabe United Methodist Church

January 27 & 28, 2018

Puzzling Relationships Series: The Puzzle of Family

Sermon on Proverbs 26:20-22 & 1 Corinthians 13:1, 4-8

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A male pastor in a small town went to visit a widow in his congregation rather early one morning. When he left the visit, his car wouldn't start, so it remained outside the woman's house for part of the day until he got it moved to be fixed.

Unfortunately, the widow had a very nosy neighbor who saw the pastor's car outside the woman's house early in the morning. She – the neighbor – then spread an unseemly rumor that the pastor had spent the night with the widow. For shame!

The news spread through the town like wildfire and it didn't take long before the rumor made it back to the pastor himself.

When he heard the rumor – and learned who had started it – early the next morning, he parked his newly fixed car in front of the widow's neighbor's house... walking away with a satisfied smile on his face.

I've heard that story before, but was recently reminded of it by a colleague: a cautionary tale about gossip, for sure...also a cautionary tale about pastoral boundaries regarding the making of house calls by yourself to someone who lives alone! But, mostly, it's a cautionary tale about the harmful effects of gossip.

Many of us learned as children that, if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. Well, one of our McCabe folks recently tuned me into a quote by Teddy Roosevelt's daughter, Alice.

She once said, "If you haven't got anything nice to say about anybody, sit next to me."

Obviously, that is *not* the message I want you to leave with today...but it certainly speaks to our human interest in gossip! *"If you haven't got anything nice to say about anybody, sit next to me."*

A friend recently directed me to a public radio clip and an online article about our human interest in gossip¹. The radio clip pointed out that gossip likely developed among more primitive humans as a means of gauging safety.

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2011/05/20/136465083/psst-the-human-brain-is-wired-for-gossip> & <http://theweek.com/articles/442686/why-gossip-according-science>

For example, if you hear that so-and-so steals, you learn they are violent, or that they are after your mate, you would adjust how you behave regarding that person because you would know you – and the things that are important to you – are not *physically safe* with them.

In the *article* my friend sent me, much was discussed about the *social* value we place on gossip: if we hear negative gossip about someone else, we are then able to compare ourselves to that person – and, usually, we will find we come out ahead. I mean, we don't tend to negatively gossip about someone in order to feel *badly* about ourselves, right? We do it to feel *better* about ourselves...to feel that we have more social value than the subject of our gossip...to feel we are *safer*, socially, than others.

And, in a world where our *social standing* is so often extremely important to us – for good or ill – *gossip* becomes a sort of currency we exchange. We trade on information about other people in order to feel more included, more valued.

But, of course, despite any seemingly positive reasons we may choose to participate in gossip, when it comes to gossip, the *negative* certainly outweighs the positive.

A few weeks ago – soon after we started this current *Puzzling Relationships* series – one of our church members, Gail Sperry, told me about a puzzle their son, Patrick, sent her for Christmas many years ago. Gail is an avid puzzler and, for many years, Patrick's job prevented him from coming home for a Christmas visit...so he sent puzzles.

One year, he sent Gail a package with a plastic bag containing only the puzzle pieces and a very basic, written description of the puzzle's picture. There was no *actual* picture of what the finished puzzle was to look like. So, as Gail was putting it together, she would make frequent phone calls to Patrick saying things like, "Okay...I have a piece with these colors and shapes on it: where does that go???"

Just so you know, *this* is the actual picture of what the puzzle was to look like – a 1000 piece puzzle of "The Winter Carnival Quilt":

Gail stopped by our house the other day to show us this puzzle and, upon seeing it, my husband, Derrick, exclaimed, "That quilt is like a puzzle in and of itself," with all the different colors and shapes! A closer look at one section gives a better sense of how challenging it would have been to assemble this particular puzzle with no final image in mind:

I'm not sure I'd be up for this puzzle even if I *had* the final image in front of me! 1,000 pieces is daunting enough *with* the picture of what you're working toward...*without* that image, I can't even imagine!

Over the past couple weeks, as I've thought about Gail's story about her sneaky son and his puzzle-related antics, it occurred to me what a perfect analogy it was to the concept of gossip.

See, gossip always involves attempting to put together *pieces* of someone else's life without knowing the whole picture *of* their life.

Gossip always involves attempting to put together pieces of someone else's life...without knowing the whole picture of their life.

And I'm pretty sure that is *not* what we're called to as people of faith who are challenged to love God and neighbor in all we do.

We *never* know the whole picture of someone else's life. When we gossip, it's like we are trying to put together *their* life puzzle...and, frankly, not only do we not have in mind the whole picture of someone else's life, but we may not even have the right pieces to begin with.

In our 2nd year Confirmation class this last week, we spent most of our hour-long class talking about this very subject. In the room with me were six 9th grade students and the parent of one of the students.

I let them know I might use some of what they shared in my sermon this weekend – because I figured they'd have good things to say, and I figured you, the rest of the congregation, might be interested in what some of our youth have to say on the matter.

When I asked them how they would define “gossip”, they said things like *drama...rumors...whispering...it's done by both girls and guys*. I asked them to elaborate on why they associated gossip with *whispering* and they said because gossip is usually private – shared between *certain* people...while making sure *other people* are not part of it.

The students talked about how gossip is nearly always negative, which is why it is veiled in secrecy: *good* information doesn't usually need to be secretive!

I really appreciated their responses when I asked about the potential harm that can be caused by gossip. They said people's reputations can be destroyed...trust can be broken between friends...and, in the most extreme of cases, people sometimes choose suicide when they've been the subject of gossip.

(Incidentally, in related comment, one McCabe member said the other day that gossip is just indirect bullying. If you're anti-bullying, that idea will sure give you pause the next time you're tempted to gossip!)

If we want to be responsible and healthy in response to gossip, there are a wealth of options we can take. As our Confirmation students said, you can “set the record straight” when you hear gossip – that is, of course, if you know for sure the gossip isn’t true, or isn’t fully accurate. You can simply ignore it. You can respond by asking the gossiper how they know what they’ve shared is true.

The *truth* of gossip has always been a problem...but, it seems, in this day and age of the internet and social media, it’s so easy to share “gossip” about people and events: if it seems shocking to us, or if it feeds our own bias about a person or idea, then we only need to hit the “share” button or the “retweet” button or we need only to type our own comment to add our voice to the inflamed discussion...and, so often, we do any or all of these things without first doing much digging to find out the *truth* of the story.

One Confirmation student said that gossip is like a spark that spreads quickly...and that is very close to what the writer of our verses in Proverbs said in Proverbs chapter 26, verses 20 and 21:

“Fire goes out without wood, and quarrels disappear when gossip stops. [And] a quarrelsome person starts fights as easily as hot embers light charcoal or fire lights wood.”

Sometimes fire is a good thing. In these metaphors, it is *not*. We’ve seen lots of news in the last year about the quick and deadly spread of wildfires from a single spark. Gossip can certainly be the fire that produces devastating results in the forest of someone else’s life...and, I don’t know about you, but I’d prefer not to be part of that.

The other day, on Facebook, I solicited people’s thoughts on gossip and I got *lots* of great responses. Some people commented with quotes they love about the perils of gossip. A few such quotes were:

“Believe nothing you hear and only half of what you see.” ... “Loose lips sink ships!” ... “Great minds discuss ideas. Average minds discuss events. Small minds discuss people.” ... And one I encountered early this week that is a bit brash, but certainly makes its point: “If you didn’t hear it with your own ears or see it with your own eyes, don’t invent it with your small mind or share it with your big mouth!”

On that same Facebook thread, a seminary classmate of mine commented that the last time he preached on gossip, he challenged his congregation to go an entire *week* without saying anything – good or bad – about someone who was not in the room. An entire *week* without saying anything about someone who was not in the room with you!

In case you're curious, he said nobody in his congregation who accepted the challenge was actually able to do it. In fact, he said *he* was only able to make it about 4 hours without talking about someone who wasn't in the room with him!

As an old story goes... A woman repeated some gossip about a neighbor. Within a few days everyone in the community knew the story.

The person she talked about heard what had been said about her and she was very sad. Later, the woman who had spread the story learned that it was not true. She was very sorry and went to a wise rabbi asking what she could do to repair the damage.

After giving this some thought, the rabbi said to her, "Go home, get one of your feather pillows, and bring it back to me." Surprised by the rabbi's response, the woman followed his advice and went home to get a feather pillow. She then brought it to the rabbi.

"Now," said the rabbi, "open the pillow and pull out all the feathers." The woman was confused by these instructions, but she did what she was told to do.

After a few minutes, the rabbi then said, "Now, I want you to find every one of the feathers and put them back into the pillow." "But that's impossible," the woman replied, almost in tears. "The window is open and the wind has scattered them all over the room and blown many feathers outside. I couldn't possibly find them all!"

"Yes," said the rabbi. "And that is what happens when you gossip or tell a story about someone else. Once you talk about someone with someone else, your words fly from one person's mouth to another, just like these feathers flew in the wind. Once you say such words, you can never take them back."²

In 1 Corinthians chapter 13, St. Paul wrote, "If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." He went on to write, "Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, our God offers us eternal, unfailing love that is patient and kind...love that never rejoices in injustice, but rejoices in the truth.

The words we say about others *matter*. Our own lives are puzzling enough: there is no reason for us to destroy the life-puzzles of others.

² Slightly modified from <https://www.jewishlearningmatters.com/AC1-A-Sack-Full-Of-Feathers-Storytelling-371.aspx>.

So may our words never seek to kill, but, rather, to give life. May our words about others reflect the eternal, unfailing love our God offers us.

Let us pray.

Holy and almighty God, in the beginning, you used words to give life to the universe. You said, "Let there be light," and there was light. May our words also give life and light to all. When we speak may it be for building-up, rather than tearing-down...and may we always seek the truth, whether listening or speaking; in Jesus name we pray. Amen.