



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The 19th Sunday after Trinity, October 26th. 2014

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost ✠

Being human is something of a paradox: We are clearly gregarious creatures, yet we are frequently very difficult to live with. Often, it seems we would much rather think ill of other people than think well of them.

Indeed, a space alien might well be tempted to conclude we enjoy the company of others primarily because it allows us to indulge our taste for sharing malicious gossip about those who are not present. Ogden Nash wrote a poem about it. In part, it goes thus:

Oh, I do like a little bit of gossip:
I am pleased with Mr. Moffet's double life.
It's provocative to watch Mr. Taylor guzzle
scotch:
I wonder if he knows about his wife?
The sheriff wants a word with Mrs. Walker;
She doesn't pay her bills the way she should;
Yet I hear from several sources
That she gambles on the horses –
Oh, a little bit of gossip does me good.

Oh, I do like a little bit of gossip;
But for scandal or for spite there's no excuse;
To think of Mrs. Page
Telling lies about my age
Well, her tongue is like her morals, rather loose
Mrs. Murgatroyd eats opium for breakfast,
And claims that I'm running after Mr. Wood;
That sort of vicious slander
Arouses all my dander –
But a little bit of gossip does me good.

This predilection of ours for thinking and speaking ill of our fellow human beings is perhaps the most common of all sins – so common, in fact, that many Christians don't seem to consider it sinful at all.

Even those of us who do would probably rank thinking and speaking ill of each other far further down the scale of sinful behavior than sins of the flesh as fornication, adultery and the like. And who can blame folks for thinking this way when members of the clergy rank among the nastiest gossips of all?

When we read St. Paul, however, we see how dreadfully wrong we are. Paul says that being nasty about other people – to their face or behind their backs – is one of the most grievous sins Christians can commit. This is a subject St. Paul addresses in the passage from the fourth chapter of his Epistle to the Ephesians appointed for today's Eucharistic reading.

In this passage, St. Paul points out that treating people uncharitably is not just sinful – it is positively pagan behavior. Christians, who take their faith seriously, should avoid such behavior like the plague.

"Put away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor. For we are members of one another . . ." he says, "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be ye kind to one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."

In the 13th Chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthian Church, Paul is even more explicit. He explains that it doesn't matter how closely we abide by every other aspect of the Christian faith – even if we give ourselves up to martyrdom – if we are uncharitable to others, we are simply wasting our time. Our faith is useless to ourselves, to our fellow men, and to God, himself.

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge: and though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing . . ."

Why, one might ask, when there are so many horrible sins in the world to choose from should St. Paul have singled out this modest – banal even – sin for particular condemnation.

There is an old nursery rhyme that runs: "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me." Children have been taught this for generations. But like so many other sayings, ancient and modern, this is just isn't so. Indeed, this is plain from the campaign against bullying taking place in our schools.

It's sad to think that it has taken the out-pouring of abuse that characterizes so much on the content we find on the Internet to wake people up to the fact that bullying is not simply a matter of inflicting physical pain.

The enthusiasm people have for thinking evil of one another is evident in today's Communion Gospel and one of the lessons appointed for Morning Prayer. Both deal with instances of Jesus healing paralyzed men.

It might seem reasonable to think that the people who witnessed these miracles would have been astonished at the healing and given thanks for the privilege of being present at these remarkable demonstrations of the power of

God's love. The witnesses, after all, were people of profound faith and unshakable commitment to their religion.

But if you imagined their reaction would have been one of rejoicing, you would have been wrong. Their initial reaction was not to give thanks, but to disparage the healer. One group criticized Jesus for telling one sufferer his sins were forgiven, and the other group condemned him for healing the sick man on the Sabbath day.

In other words, they weren't really interested in learning anything about God from the greatest teacher of all time. All they were interested in were unimportant trifles of ritual and theological speculation. They entirely missed the point of the exercise.

However, if this was all there was to it, thinking and speaking ill of others would not be the grievous sin St. Paul denounces. But the fact of the matter is that speaking ill of others can have very serious consequences indeed – and not solely for victim and victimizers but for others less directly involved.

Malicious gossip, for example, played a major role in the greatest sin mankind has ever committed. Jesus Christ was not crucified simply because a bunch of evil men manipulated a crowd in Jerusalem. The men who called for his crucifixion were no more evil than most of us.

Jesus was crucified not so much for what he did, or even what he said, but because men of profound faith and unshakable convictions had cast the ugliest gloss on his speech and actions, spreading vicious and malicious gossip about him for the full three-year duration of his ministry. Indeed, the Church once taught that long before Jesus was nailed to the cross, the human tongue had already crucified him. *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.