

Pentecost 14 A 2020 / If You Don't Have Anything Nice To Say

"If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything." This was one of our family rules. I heard it often from my Mom and my Dad. "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything." It is a well-intentioned rule, meant to keep the peace. But the rule comes with a cost, sometimes.

For example, gossip. When we see something that we think is unfair, or wrong, and we can't say anything, we might talk about people behind their backs. When we see something that we think is unfair, or wrong, and we can't say anything, we might privately try to get others to take our side.

Or, for example, physical complications. When we see something that we think is unfair, or wrong, and we can't say anything, we might find ourselves with a constant upset stomach; or frequent headaches.

Or, for example, psychological complications. When we see something that we think is unfair, or wrong, and we can't say anything, we might find ourselves often feeling sad, depressed, angry.

In other words, when we see something that we think is unfair, or wrong, those thoughts and feelings have to go somewhere. Imagine a teapot. When the heat rises, that steam has to somewhere. If we block the spout with duct tape, well, we may blow the lid right off; we may damage the pot. Thoughts and feelings have to go somewhere.

If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all. This is not just a family rule, because we tend to take our family rules out into the world. If that's the rule at home, then maybe that's the rule in the neighborhood; the community; the state; the nation, the Church. We tend to carry our family rules into larger society.

Now, my family rule is a well-intentioned one, meant to keep the peace. But the rule comes with a cost, sometimes.

In truth, by raising this very topic in a sermon, I am breaking our family rule. Trust me when I say that I'd rather follow it. My role in the family, when conflict arose, was to make jokes; to change the subject; or to withdraw. Not to name the conflict; that's just rude. So, right now, I'm breaking my family rule.

To follow Jesus means that you, and I, will sometimes have to break our family rules. This may be especially true for those of you like me, who learned that saying "not nice things" is rude, is bad manners.

Why do I say this? Let's take a look at what our sacred story today tells us about my family rule.

First, we hear from the prophet Ezekiel. God tells Ezekiel: "I have made you a sentinel for the house of Israel." By "sentinel" God means a watchman, a guard – someone to keep an eye on and protect the people. Sometimes this means protecting the people from themselves; God continues by saying: "Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me." In other words, tell the people: *You better cut it out.* Then the job gets harder; God tells Ezekiel: "If I say to the wicked, 'O wicked ones, you shall surely die,' and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand." In other words: *If you don't call them out on the error of their ways, and they face the consequences, then it's your fault; that's on you.*

This is a heavy burden for prophets, or for any faith leader, because calling people out on the error of their ways is an unpleasant business. But it gets worse...because most biblical scholars believe God is not just speaking to Ezekiel, but to all the people; all faithful people have a responsibility to call out others on the error of their ways. That's tricky stuff, because, as Jesus reminded his first followers, we need to check the log in our own eye before pointing out the splinter in another's eye. But it's part of the job of faithful people, sometimes, to name what we believe is unfair or wrong. Here's how we say that in The Catechism, or Outline of the Faith, in the back of the Prayer Book:

Q: What is the ministry of the laity?

A: The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world.

"Reconciliation" means there's something wrong. Sometimes we need to name what we believe is wrong to help make things right.

All of this, we hear God say, is for our own good: "As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?" Being called out on our mistakes, the error of our ways, is intended for our own good. *And let us notice: This is not the same as my family rule. This is not the same as "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything."*

Second, we hear from The Letter to the Romans. Paul tells the Church in Rome that all the commandments are summed up by this phrase: "Love your neighbor as yourself." As examples of commandments which are summed up by this phrase, Paul offers the following: "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet". I'm sure you can remember some other "you shall nots" from the Ten Commandments, and other places in The Bible. And why shall we not do these things? Because they hurt people. Or, in Paul's words: "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." Part of not doing wrong to a neighbor is not doing those things listed under "you shall not".

Said another way: If we are doing things which quite possibly hurt others, then people of faith can call us out on it. That's tricky stuff; but Paul suggests that's part of what it means to love our neighbor. *And let us notice: This is not the same as my family rule. This is not the same as "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything."*

Third, we hear from The Gospel of Matthew. Jesus offers some guidance to his first followers about dealing with disagreements. Here's how Jesus starts: "If another member of the church sins against you...." What Jesus meant here is "if another member of your family, or community, trespasses, or crosses a line, with you...." When that happens, Jesus tells us, try this four-part plan...

First, go directly to that person alone, and try to sort things out.

Second, if that doesn't work, go back to that person with a couple of others. It can help if there are witnesses to confirm everyone's point of view.

Third, if that doesn't work, "go to the Church". This does *not* mean tell everyone in the Church what's going on. More likely, it means go to Church leadership. They may be able to help mediate the disagreement.

Fourth, if none of that works, treat the other person "like a Gentile or a tax collector". This does *not* mean write them off completely; even though your average Jew in Jesus' time did not have close relationships with Gentiles, or with tax collectors, who were Jews themselves who got rich ripping off their own neighbors. More likely, it means that, even if you are in conflict, there's always the possibility of reconciliation.

That's Jesus' four-part plan for dealing with disagreements. *And let us notice: This is not the same as my family rule. This is not the same as "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything."*

The Church, thanks be to God, is much more than we read about today in our sacred story. It is community of shared faith and common concern for each other. We are people who step up mightily for those in need. When someone loses a loved one, we respond quickly with cards, letters, phone calls, texts. Outside of a pandemic, we offer hugs and lots and lots of food. This is the Church at its best. We do similar things for our neighbors who are struggling to get by. We share our time, talent, and treasure to help them get back on their feet, to find or return to a life of greater dignity. This, too, is the Church at its best.

And, dare I say that we are the Church at its best when share in another part of being faithful people, which is to hold one another accountable, in love, if we believe someone has mistreated us? To speak out when we believe something is unfair, or wrong? This, of course, is not the same as my family rule. It is not the same as "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." But sometimes, following Jesus means breaking our family rules. Amen.