

# ***Gossip and Grace***

**Galatians 6:1-10**

It was a remarkable scene this past week when our two most recent Presidents met in Tanzania. President Obama was completing his African trip and joined former President George W. Bush in the country's capital, Dar es Salaam—which in Arabic means, ironically, “Abode of Peace.”

It might be hard for us to wrap our heads around these two men and their spouses making friendly after all the verbal and political blood that has been shed over the last few years, with President Obama entering office in 2009 as the consummate “Anti-Bush” and riding on the wave of his popular campaign calling for “audacious” changes in America's foreign and domestic policy. Though one might argue the differences between the two are still black and white, there are many who believe these two leaders share more in common than their respective parties are willing to admit. In fact, it's quite possible that Obama and Bush are the most polarizing and reviled Presidents of recent memory—each of them demonized and excoriated by their adversaries, reflecting the great political and cultural divide in our country. I found it interesting, only on African soil in an Arabic city of peace would these two American leaders find common ground upon which to stand and embrace each other's presence.

Wisely, I'm told, neither Bush nor Obama spoke politics to each other. Instead, everything was personal, as they both have come to realize (and their wives made clear when they shared a stage), the Obamas and the Bushes actually find solace in each other's company—having the rare opportunity to commiserate with someone

who could appreciate and sympathize with how difficult it is to be President of the United States. Rather than being each other's nemesis, they both share the reality of being admired and despised by the American public and punished by an unforgiving press. They know firsthand the White House is a lonely hermitage for a leader who, in the public's eye, embodies the best and the worst of what people believe about Presidential power in this country. So for a few hours this past week, George and Laura Bush and Michelle and Barack Obama provided each other a sanctuary of understanding and grace in an abode of peace foreign to both of them.

In some respects, you might feel sorry for them, even though they aspired to the position and power that brings such scrutiny. In a democracy, leaders are the recipients of everything from adoration to scorn and contentious criticism is simply a part of the landscape. It's what makes our national politics so impassioned and helps pay the bills at Fox News and MSNBC.

However, it does seem as though the freedom to criticize often goes over the top, especially when there is hatred and malice behind it. In a democracy, it's fair to be angry over policies, programs, and platforms, especially when you're trying to hold leaders responsible and accountable; but when it crosses the line into demonizing the opposition then it ceases to be fair and constructive criticism. Demonizing consists of shorthand stereotypes, sinister caricatures, and broad, unfair assumptions when, in reality, the only apparent sin is that your opponent differs with you in opinion and certain priorities and values. The clash of ideas and thought itself isn't a justification to dehumanize a person, or belittle opponents, or

exaggerate their shortcomings or flaws. The campaigns of spite and venom, as much as they are alive and well in this country, only add poison to the feast of fools we call politics.

Now as my disclaimer, I have to confess when I was putting this sermon together I was preaching to myself as much as anyone! I was kneeling at the altar of penitence for my own tendencies to get upset and caricature and ridicule politicians and pundits with whom I disagree. I try to be “fair and balanced” from the pulpit, but I admit, in the privacy of my home or in the back-and-forth banter with my siblings (who tend to be much more conservative than I), I tend to let down my mantle of wisdom and express my true feelings, for better or for worse—usually just to get back at my younger brother! So, as Wendy will attest, I convict myself with my own words!

I recognize a far better approach would be to ratchet things back a bit. Demonizing tends to disqualify one from making a valid point, because it’s based on deliberately misrepresenting your adversary to make you and your opinions appear superior. The truth is, we’re all fallible human beings; none of us knows everything; nor can leaders avoid making mistakes or misjudgments from time to time. So the goal in political debate (even with siblings) shouldn’t be to dominate, put down, or silence the opposition, but rather to listen to them, study their ideas, and consider the differences we have with others, for it will offer us perspective and allow us to be more thoughtful and wise in the process. Even in family debates, we need political *analysis*, not political *paralysis*, in this country!

Well, there’s my Civics lesson for the July 4<sup>th</sup> holiday weekend (confession included). Much of what I’ve already said about politics,

though, could be applied as well to the everyday dramas and debates of our personal lives, particularly in the way we relate to others, i.e., how we communicate, how we listen, in how we are treated and how we treat others. We all deal with criticisms and complaints in life (some more than others, perhaps) which creates both stress and distress. Though it may never rise to the Presidential level of public ridicule or scorn, it can be nauseating to hear carping and bickering around the house or within families or at work—complaints about what you’ve done or not done, or how you viewed things or handled certain matters—criticism that often comes across as harsh and unfair and sometimes over the top mixed with malice. When this happens, it accomplishes very little other than to reinforce the unhappiness that is felt within the relationships. Like partisan politics, constant griping around the household or at work poisons the atmosphere, making things miserable for everyone.

One form I find particularly insidious is gossip. P. J. O’Rourke once wrote: “Gossip is what you say to the objects of flattery when they aren’t present;” meaning, those who you will seek to flatter when you’re with them are the very ones you’ll stab in the back when they aren’t. Most of us have been around enough gossips to recognize that. The ones who talk you up in one breath are the very ones who will tear you down with the next. Though gossip might start out as a legitimate gripe, it’s usually focused more on undermining trust in the person being referred to than in registering a complaint. In that way, gossip is more like demonizing, as it easily devolves into distortions of the truth.

We know how it happens. People like to talk and will often fill conversations with their opinions and commentary about others that are somewhere between fair and accurate to completely false and fabricated. Those who are particularly gifted at it will rarely see themselves as actually generating the news, even though the slant they put on it typically makes it appear like an inside scoop that others will gobble up. Most people are interested in hearing news about others, but we're not as likely to scrutinize what we hear to check if it is fair, accurate, and truthful. We often assume it is, so we pass it on. As a result, one person's nasty opinion can quickly turn into a publicly accepted fact. Reputations and relationships usually suffer as a result. It's very demoralizing to community life or a work setting. That, of course, is the danger and damage of gossip—it validates one person's distorted view by being repeated by others, regardless of accuracy or fairness, and it needlessly hurts.

Now if you're like me, your mother's sage advice still stands: to never say anything about anyone that isn't true and that you wouldn't say to their face! That's a rule as golden as the Golden Rule. If we live by it, we'll avoid enough trouble to make ourselves seem virtuous.

Yet, good manners aren't the only remedy to gossip. There's another way to limit the destruction that gossip, demonizing, and excessive complaining does, which came to mind as I read today's lectionary reading, beginning with these verses:

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ [i.e., the commandment to love one another]. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather

than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads.

What struck me about this is that it is more than just “mind your own business” pastoral advice. It's an instruction to the community as a whole as to how they were to handle those who have done wrong—those with whom there is a legitimate grievance, and who might be targets of scorn. It's a way to handle complaints and criticisms in a constructive and restorative manner. It has to do with this counsel to be gentle.

Let me ask: What is the normal human response to one who does something upsetting, irritating, annoying, or who has broken the rules, done something immoral or unethical, or who has committed a crime? Our natural response is to be angry at the person, or criticize them, ridicule them, or get wound up with moral indignation, e.g., “Why did he do that? How could she have the nerve?” That, of course, launches the scuttlebutt, speculation, negative comments, and trash talk that are common ways to shame a person and garner a form of street justice. Unless we have some vested interest in the person and their reputation, we normally don't attempt to reach out to understand them or the circumstances before passing some kind of harsh judgment, e.g., “Wow! I didn't know he was that kind of person! I can't believe how stupid (cruel, selfish, unethical...) she is!” In other words, the natural response is far from gentle.

That's the point, and why this pastoral instruction is noteworthy. For it's very intentional about rising above our natural inclinations to be critical and harsh with others. Namely, if someone has done something wrong, then instead of jumping all over them or

starting the gossip chain, help them to right the wrong and restore them into community. Treat them gently, not harshly; go to them out of concern and love instead of isolating them with judgment and resentment. Treat the situation and the person as you yourself would want to be treated, with a way out of the problem and not out of the community! Show care and concern to help them, rather than being snarky and self-righteous. Instead of letting gossip and character assassinations destroy friendships and community life, covet the restoration of what is good and honorable and compassionate and merciful. Create in your Christian community a safe place for people with room to succeed *and fail*, knowing that they will be loved with the same love, regardless of how consistently they have done the right thing in your mind.

Now, I agree, this is a tall order, but it is a necessary mercy for everyone. The entire community benefits when we don't immediately go negative. No one needs to be demonized. To me, the spirit of gentleness is extraordinarily civil, especially compared with the common coarseness that characterizes so many conversations and debates when people kibitz about each other. It reinforces something I've often believed: being deliberately, intentionally, and conscientiously a community of grace and graciousness is one of the hallmarks of Christian caregiving—that we refuse to treat people in the usual fashion with criticism, demonizing, and gossip—that our moral duty to each other and to everyone we meet is to handle them with care and consideration, rather than suspicion, or indignation, or with cruel remarks and ridicule.

Perhaps for that reason, whether we're speaking of Presidents seeking a little solace or you and I finding some relief from the stresses and distresses of responsibilities and relationships, everyone needs safe space to be loved, accepted, and cared for—a moral safety net of consideration that allows us to be forgiven or to forgive, with the understanding that every one of us all fall short of our best intentions and we all deserve a little grace in life. That's not too much to ask, even though we don't expect it in these times. Yet, it's a good type of mercy to offer. When we live into that spirit of gentility and grace, we'll covet this place of peace—this sanctuary for the soul—that provides for us just enough room to be human so that we may discover among us and within us that which is truly divine.

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