

“...they picked up stones against her”

Reflections on Gossip and Rumors

By Fr. Dave Heney

Jesus meets a frightened woman in anguish standing before a crowd that is growing in anger because she was caught in the act of adultery. (Jn. 8:1) She is in trouble, and unless He acts quickly, she could be seriously hurt, or even killed. It is easy to hide within a crowd and throw stones. Jesus unmask each one by writing their names on the ground. One by one they slink away. From their anonymous place inside a crowd, none of them were helping, only making things worse. Telling stories or gossip about others may be the “stones” of today. Unless we recognize the familiar patterns of a gossip, people today can also be seriously hurt.

Isn't telling stories about other people normal?

Certainly! God designed us to be fascinated by other people, and that's a good thing! Both FaceBook and Twitter reveal we like to know what other people are doing. God has made us experts at reading other's people's faces and especially expressions of pain or suffering. Anyone in trouble triggers our compassion and courage to come to their rescue. Scientists believe that this courageous compassion actually selected human beings for evolutionary success. We naturally come to the rescue of anyone in trouble, and stories about their problems naturally pique our attention.

What is gossip and why do people do it?

Gossip is a story about people that is designed to hurt, not rescue, and spread among people anonymously. When we get hurt, we can have an unfortunate impulse for revenge on perceived “enemies.” A gossip can easily tell stories to harm people's reputation in a way that is difficult to trace by pretending to only report what “*they say*.” However, that vengeful desire “to get even” clouds the very empathy that makes us human. A selfish preoccupation on our own pain blocks our awareness of the pain we are inflicting on others and changes our God-given courage and compassion to selfish and cowardly cruelty.

How can I recognize a gossip from a compassionate storyteller?

New York City has a brilliant new slogan in the fight against terror that asks people to notice and speak about problems they see. The slogan is, “If you see something, say something!” Of course, it makes sense to speak to the police or those who can actually do something. It is silly to simply tell your story about others just with neighbors! To recognize a gossip ask these questions.

- What is the intention of the storyteller? Is this story designed to help, or hurt?
- Is there a sincere search for accurate truth about everyone involved? (Jn. 8:3)
- Has the storyteller already spoken to the other person to help them? (Mt. 18:15)

- Has the storyteller told everyone else except the person! If so, perhaps they are more interested in creating a crowd to hide in, rather than a sincere desire to help. (*Jn. 8:1*)
- Does the story about another person square with my own experience of this person, and what I know from my own eyes and ears? (*John 1:38*)

What if the stories are about me?

When you discover that someone is spreading gossip, you might experience deep anguish at the loss of your reputation and good name, and wonder what people think of you, but the gossiper is uncaring about your feelings. It is like an act of terror against you. Some victims are tempted to withdraw in sullen despair or rush around telling everyone the stories are untrue, or even tempted to seek revenge, ironically repeating the same behavior of the gossiper! None of that is usually effective.

Just live your life as authentically and honestly and normally as you can. If you have a chance to face the gossiper you can deal with it directly, but that is rare. While another's gossip about us can feel horrible we also recognize that *our dignity as persons does not come from any person* in our school, work, or community. Our dignity comes only from God, and He loves us unconditionally. The early Church resisted physical attacks but ignored hurtful words, especially from sinful people. Jesus asked His followers to judge based on what they saw and heard from their own eyes and ears. (*Jn. 1:38*)

Fortunately, in a Christian community, most people who hear stories about you will try to be fair. If they hear a negative story and then later see you behaving well as usual, they hopefully will begin to doubt the story. Your behavior will present an authentic and sincere "counter-story" to the gossip.

Gossip in the Gospels

Gossip is an old problem! Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John noticed how the Pharisees gossiped against Jesus. Later, they saw the pagans do the same to Christians. Since their communities already knew the message of Jesus well, they wrote their Gospels mainly to highlight Our Lord's recognition and response to the "murmuring crowd." (Lk. 5:30, 15:2, 19:7, Jn. 6:41, 6:52, Mt. 7:2, 20:11, Mk. 14:4, Jude 1:16, Acts 6:1) Whenever you read a Gospel story; pay attention to the behavior of the "murmuring" crowd because the Gospel is warning us to not be like them! Both Jesus and the Gospel writers did everything they could to help prepare Christians to recognize the familiar patterns of gossipers.

Personality Types

Finally, we need to sadly recognize that some people are just plain negative, not because of actual conditions in the world, but because *it is their basic personality* to notice only what is negative. They see the one thing that is wrong among the one hundred things going right. This hyper-critical style is the regular setting for their mood each day. They are somewhat "un-consolable" in that no amount of explanations, solutions, or positive changes will ever satisfy. Recognizing those people in your life will help put their comments and behavior in perspective; best to leave them alone and not take their negativity too personally. Jesus prepared His disciples well to recognize these personality types (Mt. 10:15, Mk 6:11, Lk. 9:3, "First say "peace to this house, if it comes back to you,

leave, and shake the dust of that place from your feet.”) Jesus loved them, but recognized their inability to love in return.

Going Forward

We have the chance each day to help others and improve our world, or make things worse. Lives and reputations are at stake so let us remain truthful and accountable in all things. *If you see something, say something ...but let our words help, never hurt.* Our Lord reveals how to recognize and respond to sinful behavior. His courageous compassion rescued a woman in great peril and danger, and His example will keep us safe today. Let us do the same with each other.

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