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Scuttlebutt

This article is reprinted from February of 2001. It is a topic of which we need to be reminded.

Rumor fugit. Virgil gives us an insightful depiction of Rumor. "At the start a small and cowardly thing, it soon puffs itself up, and walking upon the ground, buries its head in the clouds...a terrible grotesque monster, each feather upon whose body – incredible though it sounds – has a sleep-less eye beneath it, and for every eye she has also a tongue, a voice and a pricked ear. In great glee she announces fact and fiction indiscriminately." The occasion of Virgil's description in the Aeneid is the rendezvous of Dido and Aeneas when they are caught in a storm and seek shelter in a cave. The news spreads quickly. Rumor flies.

Gossip is a part of the human condition. And in a way the round robin of whispers and delicious tales are sometimes very useful in teaching us humility. What goes around comes around.

Scuttlebutt is also downright funny. Life has its moments that are truly amusing, and there is no better way for us to realize our silly pretensions than to encounter our ridiculous mistakes in the jokes of the rumor mill. It is better if we laugh together; we are all comics when it comes to living.

But there is another side to scuttlebutt that is serious. It is as ugly as Virgil's Rumor. And in this form our intentions are not honorable. Nor are they unintentional. They are indeed designed to impugn someone's character or to cast a shadow of doubt upon one's integrity. Rumor of this kind is useful for pride and envy and revenge. More often than we would like to think, we let something slip in order to feed our own ego, or to whine over another's happiness, or to exact the pound of flesh we are so confident that we can measure.

St. James speaks of this in his Epistle. "The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and is set on fire of hell...But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.

Out of the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be."

St. James' description is perfect. The tongue burns by feeding on the reputation of others, spewing forth the venom of its own proud heart, seeking to devour men who are created in the image of God, just as the devil seeks to consume God's people. The tongue therefore becomes duplicitous, praising God but cursing men, and "where envying and strife is," says James, "there is confusion and every evil work."

This is the pernicious side of gossip. But this kind of prideful strife which in our day is so casually exhibited in secret is also part of our public manner of conversation. In the midst of a meeting, or the gathering of an association, remarks are made freely that assault another person's manner or opinion or ability. Such utterances of self-indulgence have no redeeming quality, and ought instead to be the subject of careful self-examination by the one who said it.

In his Confessions, St. Augustine recalls this kind of public put down with profound analysis. As a young man he witnessed two scholars in a debate. The debate became decisive when one of the scholars mispronounced a word, saying "uman" when he should have said "human." The other scholar took the opportunity to humiliate and to ridicule the mere mispronunciation of a word and thereby to seize the moment and to win the day.

Augustine's interpretation plumbed the depths of the insult. One scholar had used reason, the very sine qua non of the human being, in which consists man's creation in the image of God, and which is shared by all men, to destroy another man. He had not won the debate by compelling reasons, but rather by condescending mockery. All malicious scuttlebutt, private or public is guilty of the same thing. From this comes "con-fusion and every evil work."

Our Lord was quite clear about the use of language. He knew better than we, though we all do indeed know this, if only intuitively, that words are signs, signs of thought and of intentions of the heart. Because we are capable of endless duplicity, the Lord encouraged us to redeem our language and to let our "Yes be yes" and our "No, no." Words reveal the thoughts of our hearts and so Jesus warns, "...Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgement. For by thy words shalt thou be justified, and by thy words shalt thou be condemned."

What then of light-heartedness, and humor, and the comfort of a good hearty laugh? Indulge in them by all means! But not at the expense of another, who is created in the image of God, and is one for whom Christ died. Besides the best humor is not tinged with hurtful sarcasm but filled with clever ideas and awkward circumstances, all mentioned with good will.

It is good will that is the final intention of all redemptive language, and which informs the old manners that were so careful not to offend and to insure polite society. Of course manners can be a subterfuge for hypocrisy and evil wishes, but with silence the filth of such sins remains hidden in the darkness they deserve.

Finally, language ought to be used for truth, and beauty, and for charity that covers a multitude of sins, for forgive-ness and healing, and for the praise of God who is at work even "in the least of these." So then, in the words of St. Paul, "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man."

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