



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau
January 11, 2015

**"You'll Never Guess What I Heard After Pastor Dan's Sermon on Gossip"
(How to Have Healthy Relationships Series)
The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun**

1 *1Th. 5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.*

1Th. 5:12 But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you;

1Th. 5:13 esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

1Th. 5:14 And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them.

1Th. 5:15 See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.

1Th. 5:16 Rejoice always,

1Th. 5:17 pray without ceasing,

1Th. 5:18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

We continue our series on "How to Have Healthy Relationships." Getting along with each other is so crucial. How we get along with one another is a testimony to the active working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. And though we are not perfect, we try to follow certain guidelines on how to get along better with each other.

First, let's talk about

relationships in general. Think on this: Relationships are more important than money, good looks, and social success. And that is why we are working on healthy relationships. They are critical to fulfillment and healthy living.

They don't depend on clever formulas. They evolve out of a deep authenticity in the core of our souls.

Relationships are complex, maybe even more than we think. And that's why we need to focus on what? Gratitude. A grateful person encourages, listens, and is helpful to others. When we are not grateful, we are more inclined to develop the tendency to cut people down. And one of the most subtle forms of cutting people down is gossip.

What is gossip? Gossip is two people bonding at the expense of a 3rd – who is usually absent. Our topic for today on how to have healthy relationships is how to avoid gossip, and instead share good words about other people. Good words!

Here's a definition of gossip: Gossip is casual or unconstrained conversation or reports about other people, typically involving details that are not confirmed as might being true, or if true, are put in a bad light.

The Apostle Paul wrote the Bible passage we had at the beginning of this sermon to a young first-century church in the ancient city of Thessalonica. Paul determined that

church needed its members to encourage one another and be grateful. In another letter to a new church plant in the city of Corinth, Paul underlined the problem of gossip.

2 Cor 12:20: For I fear that when I come, I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish; I fear that there may perhaps be quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.

Now that's a horrible list of traits for a church. He wrote that because somehow he heard that the members of that church quarreled, gossiped, and slandered. But let's give them a break. This was the first edition of a church— church version 1.0. So it was a new church with new members that was trying to find its way, and that was trying to incorporate Jesus into their lives.

We know from the verse we just read that this specific church had all these problems, plus we know about reading in other parts of the Bible that this church had the problems of people getting drunk during Communion, people stealing church money, and people having bad sexual relationships. A far-from-impressive kind of church! But it's one of the reasons I love the Bible because it hangs out all its dirty laundry; full disclosure on failures, foibles, and faults.

It's straight talk about real life and real problems. It doesn't make it cleaner or easier than it is. It's what real people and real Christians struggle with. And with all of these problems in the Corinthian church, gossip was flittering about.

Gossip is like the kerosene that enrages the fire of unhealthy living, where people talk about other people's weaknesses and make things even worse. It's a firestorm of negativity. From the Old Testament, which is the first half of the Bible, we know that gossip was a problem.

Psa. 69:12 I am the subject of GOSSIP for those who sit in the gate, and the drunkards make songs about me.

Prov. 11:13 A GOSSIP goes about telling secrets, but one who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a confidence.

Prov. 20:19 A GOSSIP reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a babbler.

Wise words! Someone once said that he who gossips is a murderer! A murderer like Cain, the very first man recorded in the Bible as having committed murder. That's harsh! Who said that? An ancient apostle like Paul? No, a present-day Christian leader, no other than Pope Francis.

In his homily's on September 14, 2013, the Pope began with this: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye....Those who live judging their neighbor, speaking ill of their neighbor, are hypocrites, because they lack the strength and the courage to look to their own shortcomings....."

"The Lord does not waste many words on this concept....he who

has hatred in his heart for his brother is a murderer..... Anyone who has hatred for his brother is a murderer; he walks in darkness; he who judges his brother walks in darkness, [and that those who judge or speak ill of others are] Christian murderers."

"A Christian murderer...It's not me saying this, it's the Lord. And there is no place for nuances. If you speak ill of your brother, you kill your brother. And every time we do this, we are imitating that gesture of Cain, the first murderer in history....."

"Gossip, always has a criminal side to it. There is no such thing as innocent gossip....when we use our tongue to speak ill of our brother or sister, we are using it to kill God...the image of God in our brother." [Catholic News Agency, Sept. 13, 2013]

The Pope went on to say that although there are some who believe certain persons ought to be gossiped about, that is not the case. Rather, he encouraged his listeners to: "Go and pray for that person!And then, if it is necessary, speak to that person who may be able to seek remedy for the problem. But don't tell everyone!"

Pope Francis then challenged those present, saying that while maybe none of those present are blasphemers, but that: "If we ever gossip we are certainly persecutors and violent....We ask for grace so that we and the entire Church may convert from the crime of gossip to love, to humility, to meekness, to docility, to the generosity of love towards our neighbor."

Ever since the time of the first book of the Bible called Genesis, gossip has been a problem. Why? Maybe it comes from a deep, dark place inside of us where we compare and think that we are lower than others, and so we cut them down with gossip to bring them down to our

level or even BELOW our level.

If we do gossip, it is time to ask ourselves—why? Why are we trying to make someone look bad? Is that saying more about me than about the other person? Is my self-esteem so bad that I need to take others down a notch?

Now check this out: There is such a thing as SPIRITUAL GOSSIP where it has the APPEARANCE of CARING FOR ANOTHER but it is not. We can FOOL ourselves in thinking we are just trying to help.

I remember being at a church that was having open prayer requests, and a young woman stood up to share her request. She said she was the friend of a well-known celebrity, and even gave the celebrity's name. Then she said her celebrity friend was having a nervous breakdown and so we all need to pray for her. She broke the confidentiality of a friendship.

That to me is spiritual gossip. It may look like Christian love, but it is making someone look very bad when that celebrity should have had the privacy of getting well on her own time, in her own way. How would you like to be outed when you are not at your best emotionally, physically spiritually? Sometimes people speak too openly of their spouses' faults when that should be confidential. These can be spouse gossip.

Gossip is poisonous. We can try to mask it with Christian care, but if someone says.... "Did you know that so-and-so is having an affair," or "so-and-so is having financial problems," or "so-and-so is depressed," we need to pray for him or her – that is gossip!

We need to have a self-imposed HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) privacy rule where we don't share anything personal about other people unless we have their permission.

HIPPA was signed into law in 1996. It protects individuals' medical records and health information from being disseminated publicly. We need to have self-imposed spiritual HIPAA where we don't talk about other people's health – emotionally or physically unless we have their permission.

Now let me get really practical about YOUR choosing to share about yourself with others. Maybe some of you are saying, "Well, Dan, if gossip is that prevalent, then I don't want to EVER reveal anything about myself. I am just going to keep things to myself and not share anything with anybody."

I get that. But let me balance that with this thought. Some of you might be depressed today, either here in this room or from wherever you are watching this on TV or on our website, and you might be FEARING gossip thinking, "What will people say if I ask for prayers for healing from depression? If people knew that about me, they will think less of me. So I will shut down and isolate myself."

I say please don't think that way. Isolating yourself will hurt you in the long run. I want to share a story with you as a possible alternative of why we do need to be open with a therapist, or a pastor, or friends with our struggles and receive prayer.

Years ago, famous author and pastor Max Lucado revealed that his wife Denalyn battled depression. Before that became public, Denalyn felt the pressure not to let anyone know because she was after all the wife of a famous pastor of a large church. She felt she couldn't talk to anyone.

Every day, according to Lucado, was not bright but gray. At that time she had two kids in

elementary school and a third in kindergarten. Max Lucado admitted he was traveling way too much during that time so Denalyn was alone with the kids most of the time. The depression was hard on her.

But one day Denalyn said that if people were going to ask her how she was doing, she was going to risk it and just going to tell them the truth. No more hiding it. So when people asked her, "How yak doing?," she responded with a candid, "Not well. I'm depressed. Will you pray for me?"

So now casual chats grew into long conversations. Max Lucado said, "Brief hellos became heartfelt moments of ministry. She found God's presence amidst God's people!" [Max Lucado, Sept. 17, 2014, Web Devotional, "God's Presence".]

That's why we have a prayer ministry here after each service. We want to be real. That my friends, is a lot better than gossip. That's real ministry. It's a sign of a healthy community where we can honestly share our own struggles and pain, and find not gossip but the goodness of people with listening ears who will keep things confidential and who won't preach back but pray. So the encouragement is, we who are struggling need to open up and risk sharing it with the right people, and not let the fear of gossip block us from seeking help.

But now for some real practical advice for those of us who struggle with gossiping. Maybe you are at a point thinking, "Okay, Dan, help me. Help me with my gossip. I do gossip. I talk too much. Do you have any advice?"

I do. Basically, I want you to think before you talk. I want you to THINK. And you're probably saying, "That's it? Think?" Yes, but THINK is an acronym. Follow me, and take

notes in your bulletin.

Before we speak, THINK! Is what we are about to say:

- T – Truthful
- H – Helpful
- I – Inspiring
- N – Necessary
- K – Kind

Let's go over it one at a time.

Is what we say to other people about someone else TRUTHFUL? Is it even accurate or an assumption or a guess? But just because it is accurate, is it really helpful to share?

Is it really HELPFUL to that person, or are we just getting a kick out of sharing it?

Is what we are saying about that person INSPIRING? Or does it put that person in a bad light? Is it inspiring us to do good or just to gossip?

Is it really NECESSARY to share? Did you really have to talk about that? What was the purpose of good in that?

And finally, is it KIND to talk about this person in this way behind their back?

If we THINK, we will have the antidote to the poison of gossip in our hearts.

I would add for the first letter, the letter "T" in the acronym THINK, that EVEN if it's truthful, do we have to share it? I would quote Father Phil Chircop, from the island of Malta, who will be speaking at the HIM Conference in March: "If you have nothing good to say about something - lie! If you can't see it, look deeper. God's seed is planted in everyone."

When we THINK, we not only prevent ourselves from gossiping, we also develop the habit of being THANKFUL. And when we become thankful, we become encouragers, who build others up instead of tearing them down.

Our city is famous for the Honolulu Marathon. If you were running it, imagine your friends on the side cheering you on. Just when you think you have nothing left in you to complete the marathon and you're ready to give up, you hear friends yelling words of support from the sidelines. They may make the difference for you of passing the finish line or quitting in exhaustion. Encouraging others with positive words does that. Gossip, on the other hand, just makes the running slippery.

In our opening Scripture this morning it said that the will of God is that we give thanks for everything. It is not often we see phrase "this is the will of God" in the Bible. People ask me all the time what is the will of God? Well, here it is! That phrase only appears twice in the most recent translations – once to say only have sex inside marriage in 1 Thes 4:3, and the other is in today's passage in 1 Thes 5:18 – Rejoice, pray, be thankful for everything.

When we are aware of God's undeserved blessing in our lives, when we realize His amazing grace, we can truly be thankful and rejoice. To quote Father Chircop again:

"Grace is like a constant downfall of rain. It falls on both the good and the bad. God's sun rises on the just and unjust. Imagine rain falling and going out to try to catch it. It's in our hands what we catch of God's grace. What container are we using to catch God's grace? A small container, a large container, or our whole selves?"

When our whole body and

soul receives and acknowledges the pouring out of God's grace – we will indeed be thankful. And the core reason for why we should not be gossiping is because Jesus Christ died for our sins. Yes, our sins. He gives the best example of grace. He forgives us for our own sins.

The Apostle Paul had been a sinner, and he says of himself: I was once a blasphemer, a persecutor, a non-believer, a murderer of Christians, and a violent man. But I have been mercifully, graciously treated. Jesus came to Paul and asked, "Why do you persecute me? I offer you my forgiveness and I have a new life for you."

And so Jesus says that for us all— "Your sins are really forgiven. Stop persecuting and hurting others with gossip for that is persecuting me and the ones whom I have created. I went to a cross, to show you that you need not be critical of others for you have received my forgiveness and grace. No need to take people down. Forgive them as I have forgiven you and be grateful. No need gossip."

And so as our opening Bible passage said: *"Encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thess. 5:14-18)*

Amen! Let's pray!