

“Living the Word: Bite Your Tongue!”

Every weekday morning, I have the great privilege of taking two of my kids to school, which means every weekday morning I have the great misfortune of having to turn left out of my neighborhood onto South Main Street. About the time we roll up to the stop sign, most days the line of traffic is already backed up from the light at Rogers Road to our right and to as far as the eye can see to our left. Because of this back-up, most days, when someone finally gives me enough room, I inch out between the cars desperately looking to my left for a car speeding up the middle lane, while my son looks right for a car either turning into our neighborhood or for an opening for me when I can finally get over. It is stressful! In fact, on many occasions, when I actually do make it to the center lane, I am facing another car coming up that same lane. These “center laners,” as I call them are heading all the way up to Rogers Road to turn left! They are making the center turning lane a regular lane. Now, this used to make me extremely mad.

But now, as my kids can attest, I have done much better with this over the past couple of years. At this point, I know that we could encounter a “center laner” any morning we set out. But now when I pull into the center lane and see a car coming towards us, I just wait until I can get over. Sometimes we are both stopped facing each other but I don't get made anymore; I just shake my head and maybe put up my hands- all with a smile- but that's about it.

But rewind a couple of years and there were no smiles, I promise you. The kids and I laugh about it now, but some days I would get so mad that I would have my son check my pulse once we actually got into the North bound lane! And some days the hands up had company because there were times when I actually rolled down my window and screamed, “you cannot ride down the middle” or something even more direct that I choose not to repeat. Now, I must confess that there was one morning I did that and my son said, “I think she goes to Hope,” so if I screamed at you back around 2013, I do apologize. But the truth for all of us, angry hurtful words, once spoken can't be called back. We can say something that takes all of two seconds but those words can continue

to cause damage. I'm sure you can all think of things other people have said to you that have caused great pain in your lives. Now, I don't think my angry comment, "you cannot ride down the middle" had lasting affect. But those comments did remind me of the 8th Commandment.

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." As we read together earlier, Luther says that we should not tell lies about our neighbor, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend and speak well of him. He also says that we should explain everything in the kindest way. So concerning my "center lane neighbors, I didn't tell them lies but I secretly wanted to hurt their reputation, I can assure you. I didn't speak well of them nor did I explain everything in the kindest way. We can probably think many times, probably even times today that we have already broken this commandment, can't we?

And Luther writing in his Large Catechism gets even more specific about this commandment. Concerning how it applies to all of our lives he writes that the 8th Commandment "forbids all sins of the tongue by which we may offend our neighbor." What? This is not the way we operate is it? We love to gossip about one another and we like to hear those juicy things about one another don't we? You know we do. For some of us, it's a hobby and for most of us, it's just part of normal conversation. Can't God just give us a pass here?

And then Luther really drives it home. Not only are we not to tell lies, no matter how small they are. Not only are we not to say anything that may offend our neighbor. According to Luther and his writing on the 8th Commandment, "we are absolutely forbidden to speak evil of other people even if what we say is technically true." Even if something is true that doesn't mean we should say it, especially when it is hurtful.

So, with all of this it's obvious that we have a problem with the tongue, don't we? And just in case you don't think you do, let me point us back to our epistle reading from James. "No human being can tame the tongue," he writes. "It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." How true is this in all of our lives? (James 3:8)

And it's not just the actual words we speak but the words we write, or in the case of social media and the like, type! How we respond and interact on- line, even though it doesn't involve talking but typing, still falls under this commandment. And this can be a huge problem because it is so easy to slander a person these days from the comfort of our own phones. Tell someone how you really feel. Share negative comments about a

classmate or coworker with someone else. Gossip, speak evil, and hurt people's reputation! It's as if we think we have some kind of right to rip people apart.

But God doesn't grant us that right. He forbids false witness. Whether it's gossip or lies or telling the truth to be hurtful or hiding behind a screen trashing people on social media, we all need to quite frankly "bite our tongues" and really contemplate what our Lord demands from us.

Regarding the tongue, again we turn to James where he writes "we bless our Lord and Father with it, and we curse people who are made in the likeness of God with it." From the same mouth come blessing and cursing" (James 3:10). And to echo his words in the second part of this verse, "my brothers (and sisters) these things ought not to be so." They ought not to be but they are, aren't they? Think about this, we just confessed our sins before God and received the assurance of His forgiveness. We just confessed who our God is and what he has done for us in the words of the Apostle's Creed. We can read from God's Word that he will not charge us as guilty- that "there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). We confess these things and can read these things in his Holy Scriptures but as soon as we get the chance we bear false witness. We talk junk about our neighbors. We speak in the most unkind ways to people, many times our own family, who just like us, were made in the likeness of God. How in the world can we justify this kind of thing? We can't. Jesus tells us that "what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart. The heart is our problem for out of it, among other things, comes false witness and slander" (Matthew 15:19).

So yes, we are all flawed people in the heart. Jesus confirms this. But God doesn't give us a pass to see just how flawed we can actually become. He wants us to use restraint and "bite our tongues" sometimes. And when we are talking, he wants us to be speaking the best of people because "he has made "Christians out of us!"¹ Think about this, he certainly didn't have to but he redeemed us in Christ and calls us his children. Sinners that talk like you and me, God has made us Christians. This is pretty amazing isn't it? We have been recreated as people who bear the image of Jesus Christ. This sounds as impossible as a "fig tree that bears olives or a spring that spouts both fresh and salt water" to quote James (3:12) but it's true for us. We are recreated in Christ Jesus and this truth has to mean something in our lives.

So, in light of who we now are, bearing false witness in whatever form that takes, should never just be brushed off as normal or acceptable. And this is not just about you and me

¹Schumacher, "Proper 19", Concordia Journal; Vol. 41, pg. 262.

as individuals. Our homes should be places where a different kind of speech is practiced. Words of encouragement; words of support and words of kindness should be the norm. Words that show our Christian witness by actually defending a neighbor instead of trashing them. And when nothing good can be said, we should do our best to show our Christian witness to our neighbors, our spouses, and our kids by "biting our tongues" and saying nothing at all.

You know, we have such an opportunity as Christians in this world to be a great influence on our society. This is not about being better than anyone else because we know we aren't. But what we have is an understanding of who we are and where we stand. On the cross payment was made in full for our sin. The one, Jesus Christ our Lord, who knew no sin was made sin for us (2 Cor.5:21). This sure meant something to God or He would have never gone through with it. But it was his way. And if it was his way, it has to mean something to us.

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." In response to God's gift of grace make an effort; show some restraint and maybe even "bite your tongue." And above all else bless the Lord because He absolutely, without a doubt, has blessed us. In Jesus' Name. **Amen.**