

“Small Talk, Big Talk”

Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

September 13, 2015

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

Water, water, everywhere and all the boards did shrink

Water, water, everywhere nor any drop to drink.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Rime of the Ancient Mariner, 1797-98

These iconic lines from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* came to mind last Monday—yes, Labor Day—as Carol and I faced ¼ inch of water in parts of our house’s basement. Water finds the lowest point—usually where there are cardboard boxes with treasured childhood drawings—and the smallest opening—usually near things like Christmas decorations.

The first good news was that we didn’t lose a lot. The second good news was that, according to one of several contractors who helped solve the problem, we could probably have consumed the water were it not on the basement floor.

The first BAD news, besides the fact that it WAS on the basement floor and under everything STORED on the basement floor, was that it was spilling out from one of two waste water discharge pipes that emptied into our septic system. The second bad news was that we had a blockage but didn’t know where. The third bad news was that we didn’t have a schematic of our septic system. In the words of the wizened old contractor who ultimately solved the problem, *“I’ve never seen a system like this before.”*

The world doesn’t want to hear about the labor pains, it only wants to see the baby, so I’ll spare you the gory details. We figured out the schematic, figured out the pipe that had the blockage and, after an apprehensively long struggle to get the plumber’s snake through the pipe TO the blockage, cleared it.

Behind it gushed out over 20 gallons of waste water that, had this strategy not worked, might well have ended up in our basement. Did I mention “water, water, everywhere?”

What our plumbing problem has to do with this message, “Small Talk, Big Talk,” is this: the apostle James is on a rant about the human propensity to gossip and slander. Like the water that can do so much good but, uncontrolled, can do so much damage, *“the tongue is fire. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! The tongue...stains the whole body...and is itself set on fire by hell.”* See what I mean about a rant?

We know this already. Thoughtless words hurt. Words uncontrolled do damage that sometimes is beyond repair. We can appreciate James’ frustration but, I must confess, beyond that I do not find his rant helpful. He makes a diagnosis but provides neither prescription nor prognosis for a cure. In fairness to James, he does acknowledge that *“with it (our speech) we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.”* In other words, we are complex and not all speech is bad.

But James has an idealized view of Christian personhood. *“My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.”* That is, if we are redeemed, our speech should sound like we’re redeemed. He’s right, but the question is, “How to fix it?” How do we fix it in a culture where, even if you want to think the best of others and choose to keep your mouth shut if you do not, you can’t avoid seeing the National Inquirer in the grocery store check-out line or avoid hearing Donald Trump in the nightly news?

As I considered how to fix hurtful speech, gossip and slander, I reflected on when it happens. For me, the temptation is at those times when we engage in what we call “small talk.” I’ve never liked small talk: not because I think I’m above it, but because I’m not good at it. It becomes easy for me, and perhaps many of you, to let small talk default into talking *about*

others rather than *to* or *with* others. Something that helps me is to ask people to talk about themselves, which most of us like to do. Then they do the heavy lifting and I'm not inclined to talk with them about someone else!

For me, though, the better prescription is to elevate our "small talk" into "big talk." We had an event this morning for our Families with Younger Children because we want to cultivate our next generation of families. We want to give them support for the opportunity of Christian parenting. As much as we want to have an impact on our children in Sunday School, worship, Confirmation, Methodist Youth Fellowship and various service opportunities, it is our parents who have the vast majority of time—and with it the opportunity for faith formation—with the children of this church.

HOWEVER—and it is a big "however"—there are some things that parents aren't comfortable or don't feel equipped to talk about with their children. That is one of the best places where other caring adults in the church—volunteers and staff—can help with "Big Talk." Big talk like:

Who is God?

Where is heaven?

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Why do good things happen to bad people?

Do pets go to heaven?

(Don't laugh: my son's dog died ten days ago.)

Why do people park on the driveway and drive on the parkway?

(Okay, that's small talk.)

How do I live a God-centered life?

*What is God's calling for **my** life?*

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*What is God's calling for **my** life?*

*And "Who do **you** say that I am?"*

You can watch it, you see, this metamorphosis from “small talk” to “big talk” in the Gospel lesson. “*Who do people say that I am?*” Jesus asks the disciples. Small talk. “*What’s the buzz? What do you hear? What are people saying about me?*” Is Jesus worried about the public opinion polls? Absolutely not. He’s getting the creative juices flowing in his disciples, and flow they do, faster than an unclogged waste water pipe: “John the Baptist;” “Elijah, the greatest prophet;” “one of the other prophets” are the rapid replies.

And then the clincher: “*But who do you say that I am?*” Never mind the fickle public and the gossip-mongers, who do you think I am? What impact is that going to have on you? How will it help you to think big, dream big, be a big person who engages in big, uplifting, life-changing, encouraging talk?

We know Peter’s answer of course. Mark’s account keeps it short and simple: you are the Messiah. Just to be sure Peter and his crew didn’t miss what that meant, Jesus tells them—the first of three times in Mark—that big talk means big sacrifice. Jesus will die. He’ll be betrayed by the whole religious establishment and one of his closest associates. But God will have the last word and he will be raised from the dead. Big talk! Big, life-changing, foundation-shaking, death-defying talk. Who’s got time for small talk when you’ve got the vision and vista of the Messiah?

That’s the prognosis. We will discard small talk and embrace big talk when we have, as Paul said, “the mind that was in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 2:5) It’s not so hard to do. We do it every week, interceding for our neighbors in prayer. We do it now in these intercessions, big talk to a big God for big and holy purposes. We wouldn’t bring small talk to prayer. Let’s leave its hurtful ways behind in our personal lives and in the rest of our community, too. Amen.