

[Readings: Jer. 20-10-13; Psalm 69; Rom. 5:12-15; Matt. 10:26-33]

“I hear the whispering of many.” Gossip and fear are two actions that are not part of a true Christian’s character and integrity. I saw a cocktail napkin that says, “I don’t repeat gossip, so pay attention the first time.”

What is the local grapevine saying about you that troubles you? How does it affect your ability to do your job well? How do you deal with gossip at work, at school, at the game, and I dare say, here in the church parking lot or even in this very worship space? “Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed.” Do you have secrets about yourself? How do these connect with your fears? What would be likely to happen if your deepest, darkest secrets were made public?

All of us have suffered to some degree the personal agony of having someone lessen our good name, or blacken our reputation by spreading false reports about us, or by misinterpreting our actions, or by twisting the meaning of our words or by misjudging our intentions and emotions.

Few things, if any, are more precious to someone than his or her good name and good health. And yet, if we have suffered from having our good name damaged, we probably have also done our own fair share of lessening other people’s good names as well – sometimes unknowingly, sometimes intentionally, and sometimes perhaps even maliciously. Even if the information is true.

This is a form of “bearing false witness,” as forbidden by the Eighth Commandment. It may also be a kind of verbal or psychic murder that’s forbidden by the Fifth Commandment.

We kill the good name and reputation of someone with false reports, false interpretations, or simply by passing along juicy and malicious gossip. Even if the information is true, it is called slander. Libel if it is in written form. If the information is false, it is called calumny. All three are deadly – to you and to your victim. The damage done cannot be revoked, much like trying to put back into a torn pillow its feathers now blowing in the wind.

What is the motive for spreading such bad news? Is it jealousy, self-righteousness, the hurt inflicted upon us by another, our desire to appear more important than others because "I have news?" We need to ask ourselves three questions: Is it true – is it from a reliable source? Is it necessary to tell – or is better left unshared? And is it kind? -- Do I speak with charity and kindness?

E. Paul Hovey says that sin has four characteristics: "self-sufficiency instead of faith, self-will instead of submission, self-seeking instead of benevolence, self-righteousness instead of humility." Maybe that's why we sin.

So what do we do with this? Where do we go? We take consolation in the words of Jeremiah: "But the Lord is with me, like a mighty champion: my persecutors will stumble, they will not triumph. In their failure they will be put to utter shame, to lasting, unforgettable confusion." Our hope is that not only will the Lord restore our good name, if tarnished, but that the Lord will punish those who knowingly and maliciously have tried to hurt us.

Finally, Jesus tells us in the Gospel today that we shouldn't really worry about those who try to harm us, unless they also have the power to stifle the life of grace within us or can force us to deny Jesus. In short, safeguard the good name of others, and God will safeguard yours.

Jesus says, "Do not be afraid." Fear imprisons, faith liberates; fear paralyzes, faith empowers; fear disheartens, faith encourages; fear sickens, faith heals." "You are worth more." Than fear.

"Fear no one," Jesus says. Not long after, He gets more specific: Fear only the one who can destroy the soul along with the body. Soul killing may sound esoteric, but it's pretty common nowadays. At times it feels like someone has murdered the soul of America while no one was looking. We are a nation shuddering in an environmental soup of crisis. We live in fear that's stoked by every news crawl, renewed with each banner headline. And as Pope Francis points out, fear makes us cruel. The pope says fear is what drives a community to build walls, to deny the other, and to abandon the poor.

What are we so afraid of -- we who are still arguably the most powerful and secure nation on earth -- that we should surrender the best versions of ourselves? The list of what folks around us live in dread of is long. One race is afraid of what another race may do, and vice versa. The undocumented worker fears the citizen, just as the citizen blames the newcomer for his misfortunes. Native Americans fear the destruction of land and water, the desecration of Mother Earth, which they hold to be their primary stewardship.

Muslims (and those mistaken for Muslims because of their foreign-seeming dress or speech) are wary of sudden violence or exclusion from the American story altogether. Blue-collar workers are hostile to professionals who appear to denigrate their contribution or forget them altogether. Business and church both fear government, with its power to legislate away their values. In fact, anyone who doesn't fit a 19th-century definition of "belonging" on the American landscape has reason to suspect his or her safety is in doubt.

These days, nearly all of us have been in conversations that end badly, because of our deep divisions. There may be family members we don't talk to, or friends who don't come around. I've heard of arguments that escalated so badly, someone had to physically stand between two others to prevent a fight. I hear people report how tired they are. I feel the same weariness, which comes from shifting anxiety from the front burner to the back every few hours.

I'm reminded that Jesus not only says, "Fear no one," but elsewhere he declares, "Fear is useless" (Luke 8:50, 1970 NAB translation). To which He adds the important phrase: "What is needed is faith."

Will the anxieties of this present season be enough to kill our souls, to rob us of the capacity for compassion or empathy? Will fear triumph over virtues like love, kindness, generosity, and biblical hospitality to the marginalized? Will "securing ours" prevail over the mandate for the common good, which assures everyone gets what they need? If what is needed is faith, then, O Lord, increase our faith! And diminish our fears! AMEN!