

The Gospel According to Bambi
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
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I believe it was the great moral philosopher, Thumper's father, who once said, "If you can't say something nice, don't say nothin' at all!" a bit of wisdom duly noted by his wayward son. You will recall that Thumper was a cute little rabbit who asked a certain mama deer what she was going to call her baby. When she said, "I am going to call him Bambi," Thumper stood there for a moment, thumping his foot, a rhythm you may remember well from the Disney movie, and said "That's a funny name." Ever vigilant about maintaining the interspecies relationships of the forest community, Thumper's mommy scolded him, very gently, saying "Thumper, what did you father tell you this morning?" Thumper hung his head down, just a bit, and replied, "If you can't say something nice, don't say nothin at all!"

It seems to me that there are dueling impulses at work in Felix Salten's 1926 classic tale of life in the big forest. On the one hand, Thumper is being honest, certainly a virtue worth encouraging. He is puzzled by a funny name, and speaks his mind forthrightly, as children are wont to do. There is really nothing offensive about what he says; it is merely an observatory opinion. He is also impulsive, a wonderful characteristic too often drummed out of children as they grow up. Wouldn't a little

more of Thumper's naive impulsiveness be a breath of fresh air in our anxious times.

On the other hand, Thumper's mother has a good point, that idle words and chatter, like idle hands, are the devil's workshop and that it is better to be silent and thought a fool than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt. Thumper's comment added nothing to the proceedings, certainly nothing uplifting. To make a comment on someone else's life, especially one that seems to call into question that person's judgment is the stuff from which argument and discord take their raw material. In our own time, Bambi's mother might well have sued Thumper's family for slander, claiming emotional duress and seeking compensatory damages. What's more, a moral injunction such as "If you can't say something nice, don't say nothin at all," is a statement on social order and the status quo. It imposes a woodland version of "saving face," putting the animals on notice that social harmony is more important than "in your face" truth telling or even being yourself. It is better to hide your feelings, or at least keep folks guessing, than to speak your mind and risk offending someone.

It seems to me that today's passage from Ephesians reflects this same tension of valuing truth telling, while trying to maintain the harmony of the community. "So then," it says beginning in verse 25, "So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another," yet, it adds later in verse 29, "let no evil talk come out of your mouths,

but only what is useful for building up...so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” In other words, in Christ we should be able to say what we need to say to our brothers and sisters, in a spirit of trust, but they should not be so pointed that they pierce those to whom they are directed. Thumper was speaking the truth to his neighbors, but at least from the perspective of his mother, his words were not useful for building up and so were condemned as evil talk, unable to demonstrate grace to those who heard them. Although technically Thumper’s mother was probably right, in that her son’s words did not “give grace to those who hear,” it seems that her words weren’t exactly loaded with grace either. Crushing the spirit of a youngster is not a virtue to which we should aspire. It’s a tricky thing, walking this fine line between risking offense by speaking your mind and sacrificing your authenticity by holding your tongue. It is tough to balance individuality with community, the personal with the public.

What we say as human beings, and our ability to wield our tongues as both tools *and* weapons is the subject of no small amount of ink in the Bible. From Proverbs, to the Gospels, to James saying that the tongue is a “restless evil, full of deadly poison,” our use of language to hurt or heal is something God and the writers of Scripture take seriously. In our own lives, we have all experienced an uplifting word as well as a deflating word. Most of us know exactly what to say to make someone’s day, or to ruin it. We have within our bodies a remarkable thing in the tongue. But what is the tongue anyway but an extension of our minds? The

tongue is not a free agent, speaking on behalf of whomever will pay it the most. No, it is the mouthpiece, if you'll pardon the pun, of the brain, bringing out in the open what we are thinking and feeling. It is similar to what Jesus described when he spoke about things "unclean." In response to the scribes and Pharisees who were concerned that he and his disciples had not washed before dinner, he said "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth which defiles a person, but it is what comes out of a mouth that defiles." And so the real issue is not taming the tongue, but rather mastering the mind, making sure that there is less and less material which the tongue may use to get us into trouble and to defile, and more and more material which is useful for building up and for giving grace. It will not surprise you when I tell you that this is one of the keys ways of being godmore, instead of godless, if you will recall my words from last week.

Nor will it surprise you to learn that the purifying of the mind and the changing of patterns of being are what the whole book of Ephesians is about, for this is the task the Gentiles faced. As these Gentiles are told in the verses preceding tonight's passage, "you were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." The change in life upon becoming a follower of Christ is a transformation from the inside out, specifically the mind. It's not easy, and hence the reason for this letter and its words of encouragement and teaching,

but it is *necessary* for the believers if they are to grow into a holy temple in the Lord, a spiritual dwelling place for God. The key question was and still is: how do we speak what is *useful* for building up, and what *gives grace* to those who hear? Is it enough simply to take the advice of Thumper's father that "If you can't say something nice, don't say nothin' at all," and avoid saying hurtful things in order to be faithful to our calling from God, to be godmore? Or is something more required? You know the answer. Of course there's more. Let me suggest that it *is* about saying something nice, to be sure, but more importantly it is about saying something godly.

You see, we are actually very good about saying something nice, but not quite as adept at saying something godly. By "saying something godly," I mean talking in the first person of our experience with God, and with God's son Jesus Christ, and with the power of the Holy Spirit. We, like the fine folks in the traditions from which most of us come, are not very comfortable with intimate language about God, or at least we are not comfortable sharing it with others. Maybe we hide it all in our journals or our dreams, but it rarely makes it to the light of day. We are far more comfortable talking about what the church means to us than what God is doing in our lives. We are much more at ease reading *about* the Bible than reading God's Word directly, and even when we do read it, we are reluctant to talk about it for fear of looking ignorant. How many of you have shared with someone else recently some insight you gained in church, or from reading the Bible? The problem

is that if we never talk about these things, or do not cultivate in ourselves the godmore characteristics which enable us to speak authentically in these ways, we shortchange the people around us, depriving them of the story of God's amazing grace. We may speak nicely to them, but what have we really done except exchange pleasantries? Have we spoken the truth?

Consider the story I once heard on a radio program the subject of which was talking to children about money and finances. One of the callers was lamenting the way his girlfriend was dealing with her young children in regards to the money they earned by doing odd jobs for the neighbors. Apparently the mother would insist that the children give all the money to their grandmother for savings and safekeeping, presumably to hold it for the proverbial rainy day or an expensive college education. The kids were not allowed to spend even a penny of the money they had so diligently earned. Now, there is definitely nothing wrong with encouraging savings, especially in the midst of a society that revels in over consumption, but the mother was, in the wise opinion of the commentator, actually doing her children a disservice by withholding from them important lessons of worth, the value of a dollar, and decision making, not to mention an occasional treat! She had turned pride in earning into drudgery by telling only half the story. There was no grace in her message, only sacrifice; no celebration, only obligation.

So what's a Christian to do to go beyond pleasantries, to tell the whole story, to speak the truth? Well, there's an old backwoods saying I learned in Georgia that

might apply here: “Can’t say it, can’t do it.” Or better yet, put to good use the famous Nike slogan and “Just do it!” Start slowly, by adding a “God willing” or a “Si Dios quiere” when you share your plans for the future, whether it is next weekend or your retirement, as in, “I’ll be playing golf next week, God willing.” Then sprinkle into a casual conversation a reference to the last fascinating sermon you heard and how it helped you experience God in a new way. Then work your way up to putting your favorite short passage of Scripture on your letters or making it the signature file of your emails. Then you could ask someone else what mischief God is working in their life, and then when you get that blank stare, you can share how God is making *your* life interesting. The next thing you know, you’ll actually be inviting people to come to church to learn more about this Jesus guy who is really cool. And in doing each of these things, you will be building people up, and you will be giving grace to those who hear your words, and pretty soon you will be living the transformation to which you were called, speaking the truth, sharing the gospel. What a radical thought!

In a few minutes, we will be sharing together the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, the words of which remind us of the power of speaking the truth in ways that show God’s grace. Certainly, Jesus, as he was surrounded by his friends for their last meal together, could have avoided the awful truth of what would soon happen to him, preferring to let pleasantries carry the last conversation he would have with them. Indeed, in the ears of his disciples, the words “this is my body,

which is given for you” would have been a real drag on the joy of a good meal together. And yet, he had to speak them, as hard and painful as they must have been to hear. But Jesus was wise enough to know that those same challenging words were ones that were “useful for building up,” that would “give grace to those who hear.” Tonight, as we hear those words once again, let me invite you to reflect on how your words are doing the same, and remember that because of what God has done in your life in Jesus Christ, each of you can be a walking, talking sermon on the love of Jesus Christ and that each of you have a wonderful opportunity to give grace to those who hear you and know you and experience your love of God and your desire to be godmore. May God give each of us, and the church united, the strength and courage to be godmore by speaking the truth about the God we know and love, the God who has redeemed us in Jesus Christ and the God who leads us daily by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.