

SPEAKING OF TONGUES

Scriptures: Matthew 18:15-17; James 3:1-12

This morning I am going to share excerpts from two murder mysteries. You would expect a murder mystery to talk about bearing false witness, but these stories talk about it in a different way than you would expect. The first is from Agatha Christie's play *Ten Little Indians*. Ten people are invited to an island estate where an anonymous recording accuses each of them of murder. One of the accused is a proper, somewhat stuffy old spinster named Emily Brent. Emily is accused of murdering a girl named Beatrice Taylor. At first she refuses to discuss the matter, but later when alone with a woman named Vera Claythorne, she tells what happened.

Emily: Now that we are alone, I have no objection to telling you the facts of the case. Indeed I should like you to hear them. It was not a fit subject to discuss before the gentlemen—so naturally I refused to say anything last night. That girl, Beatrice Taylor, was in my service. I was very much deceived in her. She had nice manners and was clean and willing. I was very pleased with her. Of course, all that was sheer hypocrisy. She was a loose girl with no morals. Disgusting! It was some time before I found out that she was what they call "in trouble." It was a great shock to me. Her parents were decent folks too, who had brought her up strictly. I'm glad to say they didn't condone her behavior.

Vera: What happened?

Emily: Naturally, I refused to keep her an hour under my roof. No one shall ever say I condoned immorality.

Vera: Did she drown herself?

Emily: Yes.

Vera: How old was she?

Emily: Seventeen.

Vera: Only seventeen!

Emily: Quite old enough to know how to behave. I told her what a low depraved thing she was. I told her that she was beyond the pale and that no decent person would take her into their house. I told her that her child would be the child of sin and would be branded all its life—and that the man would naturally not dream of marrying her. I told her that I felt soiled by ever having her under my roof.

Vera: You told a girl of seventeen all that?

Emily: Yes. ... I've no patience with indulgence toward sin.

What would you make of a character like Emily Brent? She isn't a murderer, at least not in the normal sense. She hasn't committed idolatry, adultery, theft, or perjury. As she will tell you herself, she is quite intolerant of sin. So where does she stand in relation to the Ten Commandments? I would submit that she has broken the ninth commandment: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Originally the ninth commandment was aimed at false accusations or false testimony under oath. A person who accuses people falsely or lies about them at a trial can destroy people just as surely as if they murdered them or stole from them. But that is not the only meaning of this commandment. People can use their tongues to destroy others even without lying about them, and that is what Emily Brent did.

In our first scripture reading from James, chapter 3, James says, "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire." I saw in the newspaper on Wednesday that one of the fires in southern California was started by a child playing with matches. One child, one little match carelessly dropped or flicked in a field, poof!—over 38,000 acres and 21 homes were incinerated. That is what our tongues can do. As any diplomat will tell you, words can start a war. As any counselor will tell you, words can destroy a relationship. As any business person will tell you, words can be the downfall of a company.

Andy Rooney once said, "Keep your words tender, because tomorrow you may have to eat them." That is part of the meaning of the ninth commandment. The ninth commandment not only forbids us to lie; it forbids us to use our tongues in a destructive way to tear people down.

But what about the opposite of the ninth commandment? I mentioned last week that each of the Ten Commandments has a positive opposite. The opposite of killing is caring, the opposite of stealing is sharing, and the opposite of adultery is faithfulness. But what is the positive opposite of bearing false witness?

The answer is given in our call to worship this morning. The opposite of bearing false witness is speaking the truth in love. Notice, bearing false witness is not just about lying; it is about using words to destroy people. In the same way, the opposite of false witness is not just telling the truth, but telling the truth in love—using words to build people up in the life God wants them to have.

Jesus illustrates this in our second scripture lesson. In Matthew 18:15 Jesus says, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." Actually, in some of the oldest Greek manuscripts of this verse, Jesus says, "If a brother or sister sins at all," against you or anyone else, "go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." Notice, Jesus tells us not to talk about people but with people; not to slander or gossip about them, but to speak the truth to them in love.

He tells us first to do this privately. When you talk to people privately, you have the best chance of minimizing their defensiveness and allowing them to listen. If that does not work, then Jesus suggests having a one or two others go with you to confirm your words. This has a double purpose. One purpose is to help persuade the person with whom you are talking. If two

or three of you share the same concern, maybe the other person will listen. But there is another purpose. If you are going to confront someone, especially about a serious situation, you should first check out your perception of the situation with someone else, or two other people. Make sure you are on the right track yourself before you try to help someone else.

Which brings me to the second murder mystery. This one is called *The Father's Club* by Jon Katz. As part of a murder investigation, Kit Deleeuw, a private investigator known as the Suburban Detective, infiltrates a small group of men known as the Fathers' Club. The Fathers' Club meets in the library of a Methodist church, like an Alcoholics Anonymous for befuddled dads. Kit joins the group to get information, but he quickly becomes caught up in it when he shares his struggles with his 14 year-old son. Later one of the group members, a father named Rick Melman, confesses to having an affair with a graduate student. With tears in his eyes he tells them that he plans to leave his wife Shirley and their three children to move into an apartment with this graduate student. One of the other group members, a man named Hal Etheridge, says to him,

"Ricky, you said you came here for support. You aren't getting that from me, not at this point." ... He took a deep breath. We all knew Ricky wasn't going to like what followed. "This is nuts, Ricky, just nuts. Do you mean to say you're going to humiliate your wife, abandon three kids, destroy your family for some hackneyed affair with a college kid? No wonder you're crying! Are you having problems with Shirley? You've never mentioned any here. I mean what's going on, man? Were you hiding that from us, too?"

Suddenly Kit finds himself drawn into the discussion. He says,

"What Hal is saying makes sense to me, Rick. If you didn't have some sort of marital problem, you wouldn't be drawn to this woman so strongly. If you don't mind my asking, have you had any counseling? Taken any steps to talk this through with Shirley? Will she be stunned to hear this? Because, if she would, you're on slippery moral ground."

Melman looked confused. "Talk *what* through? What is there to say? I'm in love with somebody else." ... He put his head in his hands. "I'm happy. I'm *happy*. Why is that so bad? Why is that *evil*? Don't you guys want that for me?"

Then Kit spoke up again, telling more about himself than he ever meant to tell. He said,

"I'm new here and probably overstepping my bounds. But I can't agree with (this). When families fall apart, terrible things happen. I know. My father did this to my family. In his forties, he left us to live with another woman, a woman he eventually married. ... I haven't spoken to him for years. I'll never forgive him for what he did. I consider it an extraordinarily selfish act. I understand that everything doesn't work out, that some marriages aren't meant to be. But when you have a person who marries you in good faith, kids who love you and need you, you have to respond in good faith. You have to try to hold things together. You have to be sure of what you're doing. Then, if you don't succeed, you do what you have to do. And I'll be the first one to support you.

You can live in my guest room, cry on my shoulder, borrow what little money I can spare. But this? A secret affair with a college student, sneaking around, jettisoning your family with no effort to sort out your problems or find a solution? Your kids will never forgive you. I promise you: you'll face their anger and resentment the rest of your days."

The room was quiet. ... Etheridge coughed. "Kit, I appreciate that. That took a lot of guts. That couldn't have been easy to say, and I'm sure you haven't said it to a lot of people. Thanks."

Melman slipped off his spectacles and rubbed his puffy eyes, still looking wretched, but calmer. "So what are you guys telling me to do, exactly?"

"Get thee to a therapist," Etheridge advised. ... He got up and poured some juice for Melman, who looked as if he might topple over. "I'm sorry I've been yelling at you. I apologize. It's just that I want this group to mean something, okay? I want it to matter. You see? I know it's hard, but let us help you do the right thing. Sit down with Shirley. Get help. Be patient. Then do what you have to do. That's the price for my support."

Melman bowed his head. ... "Well, thanks, guys. It wasn't what I expected to hear, but maybe it's what I need. I'll have to think about all this. I promise I will." Etheridge leaned over and patted him on the arm (pp. 151-160).

That is the opposite of bearing false witness. That is what the Bible calls "speaking the truth in love."

- Ken Onstot
November 4, 2007