

Through the Dust: From Rumors to Honesty

Proverbs 16:20, Nehemiah 6:6-8, Ephesians 4:26,27,29, Proverbs 26:20

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As we continue our march thru the dust, we continue to face the ugly truth of what we are and make an effort to turn toward God's way. God's way is to forgive our task is to tell ourselves the truth. Today we move "From rumors to honesty."

The truth is out there but so are rumors. I have chosen rumors because as you will see this interfaces with scripture quite a bit. A rumor (at times translated gossip in scripture) is often untrue, but more to the point it is something passed off as the truth that cannot be confirmed.

Rumors were once shared at the barber shop or beauty shop or could be found on the cover of National Enquirer and World Weekly in the grocery checkout line, but in our age the rumor mill is online. From Facebook to fake news sites we see bold headlines followed by ---well reader beware. Of course, rumors fly from middle school to the office lounge as well, but I would like to illustrate the dangers of rumors with an internet story or two.

Twinkies. You can still see the rumor from time to time, but it is usually under a very provocative headline----"Twinkies Cause Cancer," "Twinkies have a twenty-year shelf life." The whole "Twinkies can last up to 20 years on the shelf because they're not food thing" will not go away, apparently because people no longer know how to do research. I can re-call comedians prior to the internet making this joke. If Twinkies last this long then maybe this is a news story but before we spread a nasty rumor that hurts their business or makes us look gullible why don't we do a little research.

Let's start by checking the label and you'll see the ingredients (in order of quantity) are flour, sugar, corn syrup, water, shortening, and eggs. Sounds a whole lot like a regular ol' cake. That's because it is.

Now Twinkies do last a bit longer than your average cakes filled with cream: a whole month. What? Were you expecting me to tell you they really are

industrially refined additives shaped to look and taste like food, that never gets stale? The truth often disappoints that's why rumors work they tickle our ears.

Now, on top of the above ingredients, you've got two dozen additives meant to keep the cakes moist long beyond the week or so you'd get out of a cake you made fresh. But these additives are found everywhere and further an additional month of shelf life is not twenty years. So there's nothing to see here. I could go on and on about how unhealthy these yellow cakes are, but come on. We knew they were not celery stalks when we bought them. To get to the truth only took a visit to the grocery store to look at the ingredients and a google search to see how long those preservatives lasted, no need for a Ph.D.

This next one returns every July, or at least in recent memory. The internet loves this one. Rumors will circulate that the Zika virus is caused by genetically-modified mosquitoes (it's not). This one is a bit more dangerous than Twinkies. This one if believed can cause a bit of a panic. The World Health Organization (WHO) is working to dispel these myths, as they are interfering with effective preventative measures regarding Zika and interfering with vaccine programs. "Cab drivers, bartenders, relatives of the afflicted children, and government employees — all will expound on the rumor, some convinced it is true." Here's the danger of a rumor once believed. A cab driver sees it on his news feed in Brazil, he tells a passenger in his taxi that he drops off at the airport. The passenger searches the exact phrase he is given by the driver and finds the "report" he speaks of---which is false without footnotes. He flies to Mexico and tells the lady flying next to him. She believes he is telling her the truth when it is only a rumor with no science, but she takes her connecting flight to Dallas. The next day she shares this rumor without checking it out first with all of the teachers in the teacher lounge. But it's not the truth and all you had to do was google WEB MD and ask about the Zika virus, but instead, the Cab driver from Brazil becomes the source, and no one bothers to check with the CDC or WHO or any expert.

Rumors are dangerous, they are untrue and misleading. They are also dangerous because they show who we are when we pass them on. We are not interested in the truth but with sensational headlines. We are not concerned with collecting

facts instead we specialize in showing how little credibility we possess. To spread a rumor is to try and spread discord and discord is extremely dangerous.

Proverbs 16:27---“A scoundrel repeats evil gossip.”

Gossip once was only verbal, but now it is also visual. A photo can be edited or manipulated. But whether it is visual or verbal to share it is gossip, and according to this writer, it is evil. But the person who repeats it shares it, emails it, post it, this person is a scoundrel----worthless and unprincipled. I imagine the bots and editors who generate the headlines are scoundrels only looking for a profit or to sow seeds of animosity, but we become their co-conspirators when we pass on the un-truth and the un-verified.

From Nehemiah chapter 6 we hear this story.

“It is reported among the nations—and Geshem also says it—that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall, and according to this report you wish to become their king. 7You have also set up prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, “There is a king in Judah!” And now it will be reported to the king according to these words. So come, therefore, and let us confer together.’ 8Then I sent to him, saying, ‘No such things as you say have been done; you are inventing them out of your own mind.’

I suppose “it is reported among the nations” was the forerunner to “many people are saying.” When you really stop and think about it anything without a reliable piece of evidence or a credible source is nothing more than Marvin Gaye’s “I heard it through the grapevine.”

Now it is easy to think of rumor as a lesser sin. Culture often dictates that we hold certain digressions into sin as more fatal or as larger. It’s fair to say there are certain sins that get more headlines, but a microscopic germ can do as much damage as a bomb. A misleading untruth may appear much smaller than infidelity or embezzlement but like the germ, it can do just as much damage.

Rotary International has a saying often called the four-way test. It’s a small mental test we should take prior to passing something along. In its original form, it referred to verbal gossip but it may be wise for us to enlarge the definition to embrace all forms of communication.

The first thing to ask ourselves is “is it true?” We hear all manner of things in a day. There is something going around school about a friend. You heard that there’s a problem in someone’s marriage. Or someone is saying the government is going to take your guns. Stop. Ask. Is this true? Don’t repeat it, go ask your friend about what you are hearing, ask “is this true?” If this does not shut us up, it should at least send us looking for an answer beyond the “grapevine” and no the “grapevine” is not a reliable source.

Second, ask is it fair to all those involved? Is it about someone’s divorce chances are you and I don’t know the whole story. If it is why “so and so” is going to Greenville Tech and not Furman I bet we only know part of the story. So chances are it is not fair, what we are passing on is our biased one-sided version. What we heard from the ex-spouse may not be the best source. So if it is not fair---we should be silent.

Third will it build goodwill? So maybe you did check it out, your friend is dating “so and so,” the couple really is divorcing. But does repeating it build goodwill? Goodwill is hard to define.

Well if we are speaking about someone and they are not present, this will not build goodwill. So, for goodwill to be built all parties need to be in the room. If we don’t have the courage to speak it or ask it, to their face then we should not be speaking of it behind their back. Goodwill involves speaking with respect and an eye toward a solution but it also demands a listening. So no matter how true it may be if we are not speaking it in a respectful manner and willing to listen to others then we would be better off being silent.

The final part of the four-part test; is it beneficial. For the sake of argument, it is true, it is fair, and it will promote goodwill, finally, will it be beneficial? Are you speaking with someone between the ages of 12-19? Then, no it will not be beneficial. Are you speaking with someone whose biases are so well known they cannot be reasoned with? Then no it will not be beneficial. The fourth part has more to do with the audience than with the subject. If the audience is not going to find the words advantageous then follow Jesus admonition and don’t throw your pearls before swine.

The fourth part of this test means that sometimes we must bite our tongue even if what we know is the truth.

We may stay silent because it is untrue.

We may stay quiet because the information is unfair to someone.

We may remain silent because it cannot promote goodwill.

All of these are times where to say something would be to spread a rumor.

But we may remain quiet because to speak would ruin relationships and burn bridges. That's not a rumor----that's sowing discord. To remain silent here is a confession that God alone can change people, our words, and our lives possibly point to something, but people are changed by the spirit of the living God, not because of evidence.

I am reminded of what Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "Small people talk about people." We can do better than that, don't judge other people. "Medium size people talk about politics." This is sowing discord and arguing with people who will likely remain unchanged. "Big people talk about issues." Big people try to solve issues with facts and collaboration, they try to know the facts before they speak about someone's marriage or what they heard at the office.

Spreading rumors does not require virtue. A listening ear and an imagination that's it. To move to telling the truth will require the moral courage to know when to be silent and to know when to speak up with respect. It will demand more research less repeating. It will entail a hearing ear. It will ask us to be courageous and tell the truth and listen to others. We will need to speak with compassion as much as passion and listen with empathy.

"So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. 26Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27and do not make room for the devil. . . 29Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear."

This is the remedy according to the book of Romans. Don't speak falsehoods, do not spread false news, don't use rumors to put others in their place. Speak up, speak the truth, listen in love, and keep your hands to yourself.

The danger of the rumor is it is never spoken with love. So it could be untrue or it could be true, but it is never the loving thing to do. The loving thing you would speak to someone's face, not because it is easy to speak but because it needs to be spoken.

Jesus is always asking us to be the bigger person in a relationship, the person who listens with love, and who refuses to spread falsehoods. Relationships require credibility, and credibility begins with telling the truth. So sometimes we must be silent, there is nothing that needs to be said, and sometimes we must speak the truth---to the marriage, to the spouse, to the co-worker, not about them or behind them but with them. And if we would not say it to their face there's your answer, don't say it.

I'll end as we began with a Proverb. "For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases." I bet your thinking---yea quarreling ceases when they shut up. That's what they are thinking as well. Someone has to be the first to let the fire go out. Let your son-in-law or friend have the last word and the quarreling will end. The last word is over-rated.

We don't have to quarrel. I speak the truth I know. I listen to the truth you speak. When you finish I have as much respect for you as when we began. Then there may be silence, that's not the sound of defeat or victory, it's the sound of maturity. I've never seen the quarrel that resulted in victory. The silence is a way of letting the fire go out it's what big people do.

To speak anymore would be to pass on rumors, to undermine goodwill, or to burn valuable bridges. Or as the author of Romans described it.

"Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, . . . Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up."

The journey thru the dust asks us to be the keepers of the truth, to point to the truth, and to step away from destructive lies and rumors which only facilitate discord. The good news for us sojourners is that where sin abounds grace abounds even more. God forgives. God can give us a clean slate. As we admit our

proclivity toward rumors and discord God offers us a new beginning. Forgiveness and a new start for all who are ready to sow the seeds of peace, respect, and truth.