

Thou Shan't Rant September 9, 2007

My husband sometimes likes to watch a show on TV that I can't stand—*Cops*. Nonetheless, because he's watching it when I come into the room, I have heard a police officer say to someone who's about to be put under arrest: "Anything you say can and will be used against you."

It occurs to me that that phrase is something that many of us should keep in mind. Recently, some well-known people—like Don Imus—have been mouthing off, and saying some not very nice things about others. The thing that got him fired from CBS was his comment about the Rutgers University women's basketball team. Supposedly, he was using language that's found in a current hip-hop song, but CBS judged his behavior racist and his words inappropriate, and let him go. Perhaps Imus should have kept in mind the words of police officers when they are in the midst of an arrest, because his words on public airways have been used against him.

Similar things are happening on the Internet. In fact, I recall that our daughter, in one of her MBA classes, worked on a project about the contents of a person's MySpace site, asking if the content could be used to decide whether or not the person should be hired. While some in her class disagreed, the majority felt that it was not only appropriate, but a smart thing to do. In fact, many employers are already checking out an applicant's site, just to make sure they're getting the kind of person they want for their organization. So again, that's where anything we say can and will be used against us.

We've heard many examples of people who have made side comments that have been rude and offensive. The Worship Team named a whole cadre of well-known people who've said things that have been considered inappropriate. For instance, they named Al Franken, Michael Richards, Rush Limbaugh, Mel Gibson, Johnny Rocket, Marge Shott, Alec Baldwin and the Dixie Chicks—to name a few. Now, I pay little or no attention to famous people, so I don't know who most of them are. Regardless of the quality of the work they do otherwise, many times they are remembered by their off-color or unkind comments, and that becomes a part of their legacy.

Now, our title today is "Thou Shan't Rant," and I know a rant when I see or hear it, but I couldn't do a good job of defining it. That's when I went to *Wikipedia* to see how it was defined there. According to that source, **a rant is a widespread and distinctive phenomenon of emotional speech or writing in the form of a series of complaints or attacks, about a topic of interest, many times political in nature.** Any time a conversation

becomes emotional, all sense of reason is lost, and there is great danger of it becoming a ranting free-for-all.

but I'm not one of the viewers. I have the same attitude toward political haranguing that I have toward talk radio or talk shows in general. I'm not very fond of them. I find the participants generally rude, inconsiderate and opinionated. It drives me crazy when people interrupt one another, talk at the same time, and turn the conversation into a shouting match, and all the negative campaign advertising and mudslinging can be a turnoff to many of us.

The problem is that this kind of behavior seems to be the norm, rather than the exception. It's almost as if being nasty to other people is in the air, because it's become such a pervasive part of our society. Sometimes it's so widespread that it invades our homes, too. Children and parents, family members and friends seem to think nothing of calling one another names, names that are often disrespectful at the very least, demeaning at their worst. I have heard people say things to one another that are not only unkind, but downright hurtful. As Robert Fulghum wrote in his little book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, **"Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words will break our hearts."**

What is this all about? Scott Peck, in his book *A World Waiting to be Born*, said that we are a deeply ailing society, totally lacking in civility, and some of the things we say certainly bear that out. In fact, Peck went so far as to say, **"Morally destructive patterns of self-absorption, callousness, manipulateness and materialism are so ingrained in our routine behavior that we often do not recognize them."** We have become disrespectful to one another, and somehow think that it's OK, because everyone does it.

I'm afraid we fail to realize just how much power language has, not so much in the way of obvious power, but it has very subtle power. One little word, carelessly chosen or harshly spoken, can inflict untold pain upon the hearer, even to the point of being inflammatory, perhaps even resulting in physical harm.

We might say, "Oh, it's just a word," but in some cases, that word is a form of verbal abuse, and that is just as destructive as any other form of abuse. Constantly being told we're incompetent or clumsy, or a loser makes a serious dent in our self-esteem. Being called names and being put down takes a heavy toll on us, and can destroy any feeling of love that ever existed.

That's why we need the words of our Bible passage for today. The writer is Paul, and he's telling the people in Ephesus (which is in modern-day Turkey) the way they need to live together if they're to exist in a civil way in community. Our version from The Message reads like this: **"Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out**

of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift."

This passage is pointing out just how important it is to pay attention to what we're saying, and to choose our words carefully. Sometimes it's even better if we decide not to speak at all. As Orson Rega Card once said, "**Among my most precious possessions are words that I have never spoken.**" If we're going to live together in a household, in a city, in our country, in the world, we need to think before we speak.

I know that many people make fun of the idea of "politically correct" language, but I'm telling you, it matters. For one thing, we typically use a lot of words in the course of our lifetime. In fact, some statistics I read said that the average person spends at least 1/5 of his or her life talking. In a single day, enough words are spoken to fill a 50-page book, and over the span of one year, the average person's words would fill 132 books, each containing at least 400 pages! We shouldn't underestimate the power of the language we use, because we are talking and attempting to communicate all the time.

Learning to use less volatile words can make all the difference in how what we say is received by the listener. Thinking before we speak can help us avoid some of the pitfalls of alienating ourselves from someone or making a derogatory comment that's unwarranted. We can learn to be more tactful when we're trying to share honestly with those who are closest to us, and not be so blunt and so critical.

Probably the best way for us to make sure we refrain from hurting another person with our words is to follow the advice I got, and I suspect many of us got, from our mothers. You know..."If you can't say something nice about someone, don't say anything at all." Those are good words to remember and to heed.

But how about if we thought about what our Bible passage says—"Say only what helps, each word a gift." If we focused on offering only helpful comments, our interactions would be far different from the way they often are. A word of encouragement can go a long way toward helping another person move to the next step. A word of praise for a job well done can make an ordinary face break into a beautiful smile. A kind word of care can help someone who feels lost begin to see a glimmer of hope.

Showing kindness to the person who bags our groceries, or the server in the restaurant can make their day. I can't tell you how sad I was to hear a top-notch server tell of the rudeness she has experienced from patrons on a daily basis. We can change that for her and others like her, by seeing her as a real person, worthy of our time and attention. She is deserving of respect, and we have the opportunity to show her respect by every word we say. That's the way to make sure that each and every word we utter is a gift.

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we're willing to think twice before we speak, making sure that our words are gifts that brighten the world around us.