

“CAN WE TALK?” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, September 25, 2016

Some time back the late comedian Joan Rivers developed the habit of opening all of her comic routines with a signature line. It amounted to three simple words ending in a question mark. Namely, “Can we talk?” It was Rivers’ way of inviting intimacy with her audience and putting it on notice that there were about to embark on a ride with a lot of blunt talk. Except in Joan Rivers’ case, it was not only blunt talk but also raunchy talk. And not only raunchy talk, but talk often touched by bile and malice. Time after time, night after night on the comedy circuit, Rivers said the crassest things and got away with it. It was the source of her fame and fortune.

I often wondered why so many people listened to Joan Rivers rather than just turning her off. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that Rivers became so popular and remained at the top of her game for so long because she was saying things that crossed people’s minds in fleeting moments but didn’t dare say out loud. Basically, Rivers functioned like a court jester in days of yore, speaking up in the guise of humor to say that the emperor wasn’t wearing any clothes, which was sometimes true.

It can be a gift to make people laugh. Goodness knows, we can all use a laugh to get us through our day. But not at someone else’s expense, which is cruel. Truth be told, I could never make up my mind if Rivers did more harm than good in her own role as comedian. What I do know is that I find the *Joan Riverization* of our present-day culture very disturbing. What I mean is that the blunt, raunchy, malicious talk which Rivers made her trademark has gone increasingly mainstream in our life together and, in my opinion, bodes badly for us as a people. And it isn’t funny.

Oh, I know that many folks today are fed up with political correctness which inhibits frankness and—as some think--truth-telling. But any sensible rebellion against political correctness now seems to be crossing over into boorish behavior of the worst kind. We see it in adults, driving down the road or interacting with us in private spaces or public places, giving the finger or cussing away out loud. We also see it in kids who are all too often following their parents’ example. Just a couple of weeks ago, a report came out announcing that Michigan was the first in the nation when it came to bullying.

I took a look at that study on bullies and bullying. Turns that there were a number of factors combined that won for our state such dubious recognition. It was based on the fact that 25 per cent of our high students report that they have been bullied and 19 per cent have been bullied online. Moreover, the study indicated that only 25 per cent of Michigan adults polled are likely to intervene to stop or prevent bullying. Michigan has

also been slower than most other states to adopt laws that might help check bullying in our schools and on our playgrounds.

I don't like the idea of more and more rules being imposed. At the same time, the consequences of bullying, boorish behavior are terrible. And for kids it can be particularly devastating. Additional studies from across the United States reveal that 20 per cent of kids who are cyber-bullied contemplate suicide. Half of all kids who take their own lives have been cyber-bullied.

Our mothers used to teach us that "sticks and stone may break our bones but names will never hurt me." Yet, however useful at moments in deflecting someone's taunts, that dear slogan is bit of bravado that masks a more complex reality for most of us, young or old. Because words can and do hurt. Indeed, they can wound deeply, leaving an indelible mark that doesn't fade.

I can't count the number of men and women whom I've met as pastor who, years later, are still dealing with the impact of being mercilessly teased and called "stupid," "fat," "trash, or "slut"—sometimes by people who supposedly loved them. And though we may forgive, how many of us gathered this morning have ever been able to forget one time or another that we were harassed and ridiculed. It stings. It smarts. It hurts. And it lingers, even if just as a trace, making us feel about ourselves at least a little less than we did before.

Our savior Jesus Christ knew all about boorish, bullying behavior. He personally encountered it left and right. As we read the gospels, we see that there was no shortage of people trying to put him down. They gossiped against him. They imputed to Jesus and his ministry all kinds of terrible motives. They actually accused the son of God of being the servant of the devil, his right hand. And after arresting and torturing Jesus, they nailed him to a cross and mocked and tormented him until he died.

Incredibly, Jesus experienced all the insults and heaped abuse without flinching. More incredible still, he took it in without striking back. Instead, following his own preachments about turning the cheek when struck, Jesus refused to become a bully simply because other people were bullying him. (*Matthew 5: 38-48*) With great spiritual wisdom and insight, the Jewish theologian Simone Weil has called this a "supernatural" act on Jesus' part, because it transcends human nature and ordinary human impulse.

I have scoured the gospels, looking at moments in which Jesus was in conflict with the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Roman authorities. The only epithet that Jesus ever lobbed at his foes was the statement "You brood of vipers!" (*Matthew 3:7*) In this moment, he was

calling them a bunch of snakes, which was actually pretty accurate. Although Jesus did criticize those who were obstructions to God's kingdom and reign, he did not ridicule anyone. Nor did he preach contempt and encourage hate. Quite differently, he commanded us to love even our enemies. At a very telling moment in his ministry, Jesus further declared: "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his fellow will [also] be liable... and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." (*Matthew 5:22*) In other words, a mean mouth will get you into trouble with God.

While at moments they could be obtuse, Jesus' apostles heard all this. So did his other first followers. And in their faithfulness to Jesus they were determined to be known for the way they also embodied God's love. It was the basis for the wonderful reputation of the early church. In guiding the fledgling church after Jesus was crucified, his half-brother, the Apostle James, specifically instructed new and old disciples to curb their tongues. As James warned: "The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell." (*James 3:6*) Here James was warning every Christian not to let the devil take hold of their tongue. Loose, ungracious talk on our part can spiritually maim others as well as ourselves.

In the same spirit, the Apostle Peter calls upon us to "put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and slander." Very differently, we should "like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it [we] may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted the kindness of the Lord." (*1 Peter 2:1-3*) Peter adds that in our commitment to what is kind and loving as Christ's disciples we should see ourselves as a "holy priesthood," always striving to live up to that high standard in what we say and in what we do. (*1 Peter 2:5*)

Under the circumstances real Christians shouldn't need rules or politically correct guidelines to say the right thing. And if and when we do say something that hurts or offends someone else in a way that we didn't intend, we shouldn't need any prompting to reconsider our remarks and make amends where that's appropriate. Above all, let's not hide behind the mere pretense of sweetness and goodwill.

My wife Eileen and I once attended a concert at Metropolitan Methodist Church in Detroit, which is famous for its immense organ. The concert organist featured that night was a distinguished professor from the Music Department at the University of Texas. She was also a pastor's wife. Almost as engaging as her music was her narration for the concert, briefly introducing each piece she performed amid other side quips and remarks all cheerfully shared. There was one quip I'll never forget. Our concert organist

explained that in God's country called Texas Christians have a way of saying the most wicked things about each other, yet then adding, "But bless her heart," or "Bless his soul," as if this magically cancels out or disguises all the bile and malice. Of course, it doesn't and God knows what we are doing even if we want to pretend otherwise.

It's been said that the truth hurts. But it's always the way we communicate the truth that hurts and offends the most. As Christ's own disciples, we have a responsibility to tell the truth with love, in a way that going to help build up, rather than tear down, and encourage rather than discourage. And the truth told in love is always more likely to get heard and generate change, reform, and improvement.

Yes, the truth matters. Lies don't help us. Sugar-coating reality doesn't either. But our motive in sharing the truth as we understand it and the way we go about it matters too. When and how we deliver the truth can make all the difference between being a friend and being a bully.

In a Joan Riverized world where people just say what they want without regard to anyone's hurt feelings and think nothing of teasing and ridiculing others outrageously, we could be called prissies for exercising some reticence and self-restraint. But Jesus was called worse things and didn't let it stop him from doing what was right. Gentleness, kindness, and love remain Christian virtues that are as important as truth-telling. No matter how uncommon today, courtesy and civility towards others should still be our guide as Christian disciples. May we be the people who in daily life model a different way of behaving. May we also be the people who, in the face of anyone being bullied, display a deeper faithfulness and courage by coming to their aid, intervening so that malice and meanness do not prevail. In this way we will honor Christ. **Amen.**