

Gossip Girl

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Saint Paul's Batesville
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Proper 18, Year A
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Matthew 18:15-20

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of
the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Our homiletics professor in seminary had a joke about preachers who were having trouble deciding what to preach about. She said that such desperate preachers often resort to the following rule: When in doubt, denounce something. Those of you who have heard my sermons for a while will know that I resort to this rule often enough, probably more than I ought to do. You've heard me criticize our culture's prevailing assumptions and values relatively frequently, but I've not, at least as far as I can remember, denounced a specific example of popular culture (except, perhaps, for religious programs on the History Channel). We all know that

there's plenty of sex and violence in today's pop culture offerings, but I tend not to think it's worth preaching about.

Well, I've got a bee in my biretta about something this week, so I hope you'll forgive me for swatting at it a bit. It's the television program *Gossip Girl* which broadcasts on the CW network. For the sake of research, I thought I'd watch an episode or two to make sure I wasn't going off the deep end; I made it through part of an episode, and it was enough. This is a program about teenagers and it's targeted to a teenage audience. The drug use and casual sex and other examples of bad behavior abound. Over the past several years, the producers of this show have cultivated an image (through racy ad campaigns) as being the show that children's parents don't want them to watch. Of course, this is all meant to get kids to watch it more.

The element that most people seem not to notice, but which struck me considering this week's Gospel text, is the perspective from which the program's story is told. The events of any given episode are reported by an anonymous blogger (the eponymous "gossip girl") whom the audience never sees. Her motivations aren't clear, but her *raison d'être* seems to be sharing information about the most private parts of the characters' lives. That element of the show seems to bother people a lot less than all the sex, and this, I think, is the most troubling thing about the program. One can watch and disagree with the actions of the characters, but it never occurs to the audience that the perspective itself is flawed.

This is unsurprising, because as much as we might feign disgust at the practice of gossiping, we love hearing gossip, and we love sharing it. We love to be voyeurs, to know what's going on in the lives of our fellows, even if we have no business

knowing it. We love to whisper secret slander to our friends, because it makes us feel like we're the source of all knowledge worth possessing. And we love most to share evidence that we ourselves have been mistreated, even if we have no intention of confronting the person who mistreated us. Indeed, it can be a great deal more fun to remain aloof from our enemy, because we can tell more people and gain more satisfaction by vilifying him than by being reconciled to him.

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus gives us another way. If we feel somebody has mistreated us, talk to him in private. If that doesn't work, take a friend or two and try to hash it out. If that doesn't work, bring it to the church, which is to say discuss your grievance openly with the authority of the community in which the accuser and the accused wish to maintain bonds of affection.

This is a great deal more effective than whispering insults to those uninvolved. But, as I

said, we do not always wish to rectify the situation, loving the opportunity to gossip more than we desire to live in love with our brothers and sisters. The important thing about Jesus' mandate here is not that it is more effective, but that it is more Christian. If we love our brother, which is our obligation, then we should avoid what scripture calls "murmuring in the tents" and which today we call malicious gossip.

Did you know that there is more in the psalms about malicious gossip than any other sin? Well, there is. Do you know what led God to declare that the generation of Israelites who left Mount Sinai would wander in the desert until only their children and grandchildren were left to enter the Promised Land? It was neither idolatry nor sexual promiscuity nor any other sin which we are quick to denounce. It was because the Israelites were "murmuring in their tents", gossiping, that they

were forbidden from entering the land which had been promised.

We must be careful about gossip, then, because it is deadly serious. We must catch ourselves, because we can do it without even thinking about it. We must examine our intentions before sharing information about another, because sometimes our intentions are hidden from us. Is something we say meant to encourage prayer and concern or is it meant to share a bit of juicy information?

I was listening a couple of days ago to a podcast of *This American Life*, which last week just so happened to be about gossip. An author read a short story she had written about a reality television producer whose job was to encourage malicious gossip during individual interviews with the fictional program's contestants. If you've watched any reality TV, you probably know that backbiting is encouraged because it helps ratings. This is the culture in which we live and at least

television executives have figured out that we love to hear and share gossip so much that even the murmuring in the studios of people we don't know can draw us in and entertain us. This makes it so much more difficult to follow Jesus' directive, given in a time well before television and blogs and all the other media used to air people's smutty laundry. This makes it all the more critical that we speak with care and discretion. It's not just a matter of propriety; it's a matter of Christianity. Living in love with the brethren means speaking with love about him. Only in doing this within can Christ's Church be prepared to weather the storms which beset her from without.

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