

I Corinthians 1:10-18
January 23, '11

“GUARDRAILS & TATTLETALES”

WE’VE ALL SEEN IT FAR MORE TIMES THAN WE’VE WANTED TO.

IN FACT, FOR THE MOST PART, WE’D RATHER NEVER HAVE SEEN IT AT ALL.

I’M TALKING ABOUT THE CHILLING PICTURE OF THE TROUBLED YOUNG MAN WHO WREAKED HAVOC IN TUCSON A FEW WEEKS AGO THAT JARRED US ALL.

ONE COULD RIGHTLY ARGUE THAT OTHER EVENTS OF RECENT WEEKS HAVE BEEN MORE DEVASTATING – FLOODS IN SRI LANKA & AUSTRALIA, MUDSLIDES IN BRAZIL, BIRDS DROPPING FROM THE SKY & DEAD FISH WASHING TO THE SHORE.

BUT IT’S THE HORRIFYING EVENT IN TUCSON THAT HAS MOST CAPTURED OUR ATTENTION AT THE BEGINNING OF 2011.

IT’S NOT ONLY THE PICTURE THAT TELLS US THIS WAS A TROUBLED YOUNG MAN.

IT’S THE REPORTS OF HIS PAST & THOSE WHO WERE CONVINCED THIS MIGHT HAPPEN IF NOTHING WERE DONE TO STOP HIM.

UPON HEARING THE REPORTS OF ALL THOSE WHO WERE FRIGHTENED BY HIM, I HAD AN IDEA.

WE’VE GOT A NATIONAL REGISTRY FOR JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING.

THERE’S A SEX OFFENDERS NATIONAL REGISTRY.

THERE’S A NATIONAL REGISTRY FOR ARSONISTS.

MANY OF YOU, I’M SURE, ARE ON THE “NO-CALL” NATIONAL REGISTRY.

THERE ARE SOME RATHER UNUSUAL NATIONAL REGISTRIES.

THERE IS, BELIEVE IT OR NOT, A NATIONAL REGISTRY OF BIG TREES & A NATIONAL REGISTRY OF BEARDS. (YOU MIGHT WANT TO LOOK UP VAUGHN MURRAY ON THAT ONE.)

THERE’S A NATIONAL REGISTRY OF DANCE EDUCATORS & A NATIONAL REGISTRY OF CERTIFIED STAFFING INDUSTRY SPECIALISTS – WHATEVER THAT IS!

SO, WITH ALL OF THESE NATIONAL REGISTRIES, WOULDN’T IT JUST MAKE SENSE TO HAVE A NATIONAL REGISTRY OF ANYONE ABOUT WHOM IT HAS EVER BEEN SAID, “*THAT GUY’S GOING TO GO ON A SHOOTING RAMPAGE SOMEDAY!*”

YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED THAT STATEMENT WAS SEXIST IN NATURE – INTENTIONALLY SO.

I THINK THE NUMBER OF WOMEN ABOUT WHOM THAT HAS EVER BEEN SAID IS NEGLIGIBLE & EVEN CLOSE TO NON-EXISTENT!

THAT, IN ITSELF, COULD BE LEGITIMATE CAUSE FOR RAGE AMONG FEMALES!

“*WHY ARE YOU GUYS SUCH IDIOTS?!*”

BUT SERIOUSLY, WHY DON’T WE JUST KEEP A RECORD OF ALL THESE GUYS?

THE PROBLEM IS – WHAT DO YOU DO WITH IT?

AND, LET'S FACE IT, MANY OF US HERE TODAY WOULD PROBABLY BE ON THAT LIST OURSELVES IF WE LOOKED AT OUR OWN MOMENTS OF ANGER.

IT IS A SHAME, THOUGH, ISN'T IT, THAT WE CAN'T GET PEOPLE THE HELP THEY NEED & THE HELP THEY DESERVE TO TRY TO PREVENT SUCH THINGS FROM HAPPENING.

YOU'VE HEARD IT SAID THAT IT'S MUCH WISER TO PUT A GUARDRAIL AT THE *TOP* OF A HILL THAN TO STATION AN AMBULANCE AT THE *BOTTOM* OF IT.

YOU KNOW, I THINK THAT'S WHAT PAUL HAS GIVEN US HERE IN THIS PASSAGE WE'VE READ THIS MORNING.

HE'S GIVEN US THE GIFT OF A GUARDRAIL IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH ONE ANOTHER.

THIS IS A PASSAGE THAT IS ORDINARILY PASSED OVER WHEN IT APPEARS IN THE LECTIONARY DURING PEACEFUL TIMES IN THE LIFE OF A CHURCH.

ON THE OTHER HAND, IT IS ONE THAT IS PAINSTAKINGLY SEARCHED FOR IN PERIODS OF CONFLICT.

WHEN THINGS ARE TENSE & MEMBERS ARE BICKERING, ARGUING, RUMORING & DRAWING LINES IN THE SAND, A PASTOR WILL THUMB THROUGH PAUL'S LETTERS, THINKING, "*WHERE IS IT THAT PAUL TELLS THE PEOPLE THEY NEED TO QUIT THEIR GRIPING & DISSENSION, PUT AN END TO THEIR CLIQUES & JUST STOP FIGHTING WITH ONE ANOTHER? I KNOW IT'S HERE SOMEWHERE.*"

AND THEN, WHEN IT'S DISCOVERED, THAT PASTOR WILL MORE THAN LIKELY SAY, "*OH, YEAH. I SHOULD HAVE REMEMBERED IT WAS IN ONE OF HIS LETTERS TO THE CORINTHIANS. THAT CHURCH HAD MORE PROBLEMS THAN WE DO!*"

AND THEN, HE OR SHE WILL SET TO WORK IN PREPARING A SERMON THAT WILL REALLY CALL THE PEOPLE OUT ON THEIR BEHAVIOR.

IN THAT SERMON, HE WILL RIP THEM UP ONE SIDE & DOWN THE OTHER, CHASTISING THEM FOR THEIR BEHAVIOR THAT IS CLEARLY IN VIOLATION OF NEW TESTAMENT STANDARDS.

HE'LL RAISE HIS VOICE & PERHAPS EVEN SHAKE HIS FIST & POINT HIS FINGER.

HE'LL SEND A QUICK GLANCE IN THE DIRECTION OF THOSE WHO ARE GUILTY IN HOPES THEY'LL GET THE MESSAGE & ALTER THEIR ATTITUDES & RIGHT THEIR WRONGS.

THAT, IN ESSENCE, IS THE AMBULANCE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE HILL.

THAT PASTOR IS ALREADY FACED WITH A WHOLE SET OF BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS & BRUISED EGOS & IT WON'T BE EASY TO MEND THE WOUNDS THAT HAVE BEEN INFLICTED AS A RESULT OF THAT TRAGIC FALL IN THE LIFE OF THAT CONGREGATION.

THESE WORDS OF PAUL ARE PERHAPS BETTER SERVED AS A GUARDRAIL.

I KNOW I HAVE A TENDENCY TOWARD NAIVETE & I'M LIVING PROOF THAT IGNORANCE IS BLISS, BUT I'D LIKE TO SUGGEST THAT YOU LOOK AROUND YOU & SEE THE WARMTH, LOVE, GENUINENESS & GENEROSITY OF THOSE WHO ARE WORSHIPPING WITH YOU TODAY.

YOU DON'T SEE FACTIONS.

YOU DON'T SEE CLIQUES.

YOU DON'T SEE ANYONE LUSTING AFTER POWER.

YOU DON'T SEE ANYONE OUT TO GET SOMEONE ELSE.

THE THRILL OF BEING PART OF A FELLOWSHIP OF BELIEVERS LIKE THAT WHICH WE EXPERIENCE HERE IS WHY MY FAVORITE PSALM IS THE ONE WHICH SAYS, "*BEHOLD, HOW GOOD & PLEASANT IT IS WHEN BROTHERS & SISTERS DWELL IN UNITY.*"

THESE WORDS OF PAUL ARE A GUARDRAIL AGAINST ANYTHING LESS THAN THAT.

THEY AREN'T A DEMAND FOR UNIFORMITY OR ABSOLUTE AGREEMENT ON EVERY ISSUE.

IT'S A CHALLENGE TO US TO BE AWARE OF HOW "GOOD & PLEASANT" OUR UNITY MAKES US FEEL AND ALL THAT IT ENABLES US TO DO *WITH* AND *FOR* ONE ANOTHER AS WELL AS *WITH* AND *FOR* OUR COMMUNITY.

IT'S A CHALLENGE TO SAFEGUARD THAT UNITY & A REMINDER THAT WE ALL NEED TO DO OUR PART TO ENSURE ITS CONTINUATION.

PAUL HAS GIVEN US, IN THESE WORDS, THE GIFT OF A GUARDRAIL.

THERE IS SOMETHING ELSE HERE, THOUGH, THAT ALSO WARRANTS OUR ATTENTION.

I WANT TO BE CAREFUL BECAUSE I THINK WHAT I'M ABOUT TO SAY COULD EASILY BE MISCONSTRUED.

AS YOU LOOK AT THIS PASSAGE, PAUL OFFERS RATHER HARSH WORDS TO THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH BASED ON REPORTS THAT HAVE BEEN BROUGHT TO HIM.

THESE REPORTS HAVE COME FROM "*CHLOE'S PEOPLE.*"

WE KNOW VERY LITTLE ABOUT CHLOE & EVEN LESS ABOUT "HER PEOPLE."

THIS IS THE ONE & ONLY TIME SHE'S MENTIONED IN SCRIPTURE SO WE CAN DO LITTLE MORE THAN SPECULATE AS TO WHO SHE WAS.

SHE MAY HAVE BEEN AN INFLUENTIAL LEADER WITHIN THE CHURCH IN CORINTH OR IN EPHEBUS.

HER PEOPLE MAY HAVE BEEN HER FAMILY MEMBERS, HER FRIENDS OR HER SERVANTS.

NOW I DON'T WANT THIS TO COME ACROSS AS A "SHOOT THE MESSENGER" KIND OF THING, BECAUSE OBVIOUSLY THERE WERE SERIOUS PROBLEMS IN THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH & OBVIOUSLY PAUL NEEDED TO BE AWARE OF THOSE PROBLEMS & IT WAS PRUDENT OF HIM TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE.

BUT, LET'S FACE IT.

IN MODERN-DAY PARLANCE, WOULDN'T CHLOE'S PEOPLE SIMPLY BE SEEN AS TATTLETALES?

I HAVE NO IDEA HOW ALL OF THIS INFORMATION WAS CONVEYED AND, AGAIN, I THINK IT WAS GOOD THAT PAUL WAS INFORMED SO HE COULD ADDRESS THE ISSUE, BUT IT RAISES AN INTERESTING ISSUE OF HOW WE TALK ABOUT THE CHURCH – EITHER OUR OWN OR SOMEONE ELSE'S.

I REMEMBER NOT LONG AFTER I HAD ARRIVED AT A NEW CHURCH – NOT THIS ONE – I MET AN ELDERLY WOMAN IN THE COMMUNITY WHO ASKED WHAT I DID.

WHEN I TOLD HER I WAS THE NEW PASTOR OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, SHE SHOOK HER HEAD & SAID, "*OH, THAT USED TO BE SUCH A NICE CHURCH.*"

THE SAME SORT OF THING HAPPENED HERE.

A YOUNG COUPLE WHO PRE-DATES MY TIME HERE AT EASTMINSTER TOLD ME THAT ON THE FIRST SUNDAY THEY VISITED THE CHURCH, SOMEONE SHOWED THEM AROUND & THEN SAID, “*YOU KNOW, I HAVE TO BE HONEST WITH YOU. I DON’T THINK YOU WANT TO JOIN THIS CHURCH. WE’VE GOT A TON OF PROBLEMS HERE.*”

PROBABLY NOT THE BEST PERSON TO BE SHOWING PEOPLE AROUND THE CHURCH!

SINCE THAT COUPLE JOINED, THOUGH, IN SPITE OF THE WARNING, MAYBE IT WAS JUST A BIT OF REVERSE PSYCHOLOGY THAT WAS BEING USED ON THEM – WANTING THEM TO THINK THEY WERE DESPERATELY NEEDED IN SUCH A DIVIDED CHURCH!

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

HOW DO YOU TALK ABOUT YOUR CHURCH & WOULD THE THINGS YOU SAY ENCOURAGE OR DISCOURAGE SOMEONE FROM TRYING US OUT?

WHAT ABOUT YOUR ATTITUDE & YOUR WORDS ABOUT OTHER CHURCHES?

IF YOU HEAR SOMETHING NEGATIVE OR A BIT SCANDALOUS OR SCURRILOUS ABOUT ANOTHER CHURCH, ARE YOU JUST ITCHING TO SHARE THAT DIRT WITH SOMEONE ELSE?

WHAT IT COMES DOWN TO IS THIS – ARE YOU A TATTLETALE?

UNFORTUNATELY, MANY OF US ARE.

THERE’S SOMETHING IN OUR NATURE THAT MAKES US RELISH THE THOUGHT OF SHARING BAD NEWS.

THAT’S WHAT JAMES, THE BROTHER OF JESUS, MEANT WHEN HE SAID THE TONGUE IS “*A RESTLESS EVIL, FULL OF DEADLY POISON!*”

LET ME URGE YOU TO DO YOUR BEST TO TAME YOUR TONGUE – ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU’RE TEMPTED TO BE A TATTLETALE.

DO YOUR BEST TO MAKE SURE THAT ANYTHING YOU SAY ABOUT YOUR CHURCH OR ANY CHURCH – ANYTHING YOU SAY ABOUT ANOTHER PERSON BE WORDS THAT BUILD UP & NEVER TEAR DOWN – WORDS THAT HEAL & NOT WORDS THAT HURT.

IN THIS PASSAGE, WHAT PAUL WAS ENCOURAGING THE PEOPLE TO DO WAS TO KEEP THEIR EYES CENTERED ON CHRIST & THE POWER THAT IS FOUND IN HIS CROSS – IN HIS SACRIFICE FOR OUR SALVATION.

THAT’S ALL JESUS ASKED OF HIS FOLLOWERS.

WHEN HE CALLED HIS DISCIPLES, HE SIMPLY SAID “FOLLOW ME.”

HE WASN’T WORRIED THAT HIS FOLLOWERS MIGHT NOT TURN OUT TO BE MODEL CITIZENS.

AND SURELY THEY WEREN’T!

SO OFTEN THEY DIDN’T UNDERSTAND WHAT HE SAID & ON THE RARE OCCASIONS WHEN THEY *DID*, THEY’D TRY TO TALK HIM OUT OF HIS IDEAS.

THEY ARGUED ABOUT WHO WAS THE GREATEST.

ONE OF THEM BETRAYED HIM – ANOTHER DENIED EVEN KNOWING HIM.

WHEN THINGS REALLY GOT TOUGH, NOT ONE OF THEM STUCK AROUND.

BUT JESUS SIMPLY SAID, "FOLLOW ME," AND SOMETHING IN THE WAY HE SAID IT POINTED TO GOD SO CLEARLY THAT TWO, THEN FOUR & THEN 12 DECIDED THAT WHATEVER JESUS HAD TO OFFER WAS WORTH LEAVING THEIR OLD LIVES TO FOLLOW.

AND AS FAR AS JESUS WAS CONCERNED, THE ONLY CREDENTIALS THEY WOULD NEED WOULD BE THAT WILLINGNESS TO FOLLOW.

IT WAS FROM THAT DIVERSE & CONTENTIOUS DOZEN THAT HE WOULD BUILD HIS MINISTRY.

THAT'S WHO WE ARE TODAY – THOSE WHO HAVE HEARD HIS CALL & ARE WILLING TO FOLLOW HIM.

IT IS OUR UNITY IN THE MIDST OF DIVERSITY – IT'S OUR DESIRE TO SPEAK WELL OF ONE ANOTHER AND TO SPEAK WELL OF ALL PEOPLE THAT GIVE US THE POWER TO BE HIS WITNESSES IN THE WORLD TODAY. AMEN.

*The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
Evansville, Indiana*