

“Handle with Care: Transparency”

James 3:1-12; Ephesians 4:1-6, 11-16; John 12:1-8 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might be filled with
your Spirit of courage and humble compassion, equipping us for honest, open dialogue and
discernment. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

Clearly, James had been through something! In those twelve verses, he spews forth a torrent of metaphors that could only erupt from a victim of a major gossip storm. And even though those metaphors may be exaggerated beyond the point of credulity, the point James is making stands: we need to be careful about what we say. Because words can do damage. Conjecture can create conflict. Misinformation makes for messes.

In this series about spiritual maturity and its vital role in helping build up the body of Christ in love, we have mentioned the word “integrity” quite a bit. And one of the foundational ingredients of integrity is honesty. One of the ways we engage in honesty, as an institution – that is, as a congregation – is what we call transparency. Transparency ought to be baked in here at Vista La Mesa, since we are a Disciples church, and therefore, the ultimate authority here lies with the congregation. If the congregation is in charge, the congregation has to have all the information needed to make wise decisions. And that is where transparency comes in. There is a reason this is our focus on the day we’re having our annual congregational meeting: this is the day

when we most directly engage in transparency. The names, the numbers, the hopes, the concerns – all of it is laid on the table today, and each of you – all of us together – decide whether the plans put together by those we’ve selected to do these various tasks are the plans we want to adopt for the coming year. This information is, of course, available year-round to those who are interested. But this is the one day when we don’t just make it available; for the occasion of this meeting, we ask that you review it, assess it, make sure you understand it, and ask questions if you don’t. When trust is high in a congregation, people are mostly happy to assume that those who are supposed to be taking care of these details are doing so just fine without much oversight. But one of the ways we maintain trust is through transparency: making sure everyone has access to the information that shapes the way this congregation is run. It takes all of us to cultivate integrity as an institution, and it takes all of us pursuing spiritual maturity to build the church up in love.

Unfortunately, sometimes those who are in charge of the information get so stressed out about it that they start to limit access. Many years ago, I had someone bring a first draft of what was supposed to be a proposed budget. Except it wasn’t a budget; it was a chart of projected expenses. I pointed out that without the projected income, this draft wasn’t really complete; it did not qualify as a budget. And the response was that if the income side were included, everyone would see that there was a \$20,000 deficit and freak out. But that’s exactly what transparency is about. We don’t hide the deficit or any other kind of difficulty; we share the burden of that

knowledge, so that everyone can pitch in to deal with the challenges before us, and no one person has to feel like it's their responsibility alone to fix the problem.

There are, of course, other situations that arise in congregations where people make unfortunate choices to hide information, sometimes in attempts to manipulate the outcomes. And here is where we get back to the problems James was alluding to. It is human nature to talk. Some people talk to share information. Some people talk not just to share, but to process information, to figure out what it means and what they think about it. Some people share, just to get things off their chests and stop worrying about it. But if someone else heard all that talk, then it's on their chests and may very well need to be shoved off on someone else. And one of the problems with talking, when we don't actually have all the information about the situation, is that humans like things to make sense. We like to understand the meaning of things. And so when we're talking about things and we don't have all the details, we naturally and sometimes even without realizing it fill in the blanks. We may not know why someone did what they did, but we guess and eventually it sounds like that person told us their motivations. We may not know how certain decisions were made, but we know how we would have handled it, so we assume that's what happened and move forward with that assumption.

Our innate desire for things to make sense is often so strong it overrides our integrity. We end up sharing misinformation without even intending to, because our version of what happened makes sense to us. I don't know what happened to James,

but I can imagine all sorts of situations that could have led to the bitterness he's expressing here in chapter 3, lashing out at the tongue as the problem, when in reality, without the heart and the mind having feelings and making assumptions, the tongue wouldn't have said what it said.

And then, of course, there is that story we read from John. There is a story of Jesus being anointed by a woman with costly perfume in all four gospels. John is the only one who identifies the woman as Mary of Bethany. The conversation about whether it was a waste of money is also present in Matthew and Mark, but John is the only one who names the complainer as Judas "(the one who was about to betray him)". You will recall that the gospels of Matthew and Mark were written much earlier than the gospel of John. And so we see meaning-making at work here. By the time John was written, the finger-pointing and the separating the good guys from the bad guys had begun in earnest. Judas was, of course, the worst of the bad guys, so why not lay all the blame for this miserly misinterpretation of a beautiful act of devotion squarely at his feet? And why stop there?

That second parenthetical section in this passage is where it gets really interesting! None of the other gospels mention anything about Judas being the group's bookkeeper. Indeed, nowhere else that I'm aware of is there any clear indication that they even had a "common purse." But here we have a direct accusation of theft – sixty or more years after the fact, but no less vehement for the delay. Judas Iscariot, not just a betrayer, but an embezzler!

The way the gospel is written – without any acknowledgement that many years had passed – implies that Judas was keeping the common purse and people know he was stealing from it at the time. The question then becomes: why? Why on earth would they leave an embezzler in charge of the money? Allowing that kind of dishonesty to continue doesn't really seem like Jesus' style, does it? I am left to conclude that this is an accusation concocted many years later, to add to the heft of the judgment the early Christians heaped upon Judas and all their other former friends who hadn't decided to follow Jesus.

Our brains and our hearts fill in the gaps. We say things we can't back up. Once we've decided what kind of person someone is, we only see the things about them that support our judgment, and nothing that would call it into question. This is not spiritual maturity, but it is human nature.

The answer to misinformation, prejudice and gossip is not less conversation, but more information – transparency, trust, openness to questions. Most congregations could have told John and Judas that they never should have had just one person in charge of the money to begin with. We understand that appropriate processes and checks and balances protect not just the funds from theft, but also the people handling them from false accusations.

Transparency is the responsibility primarily of those who have the information and understand it best. But it's also the responsibility of those who aren't directly involved. If you don't understand, ask questions; chances are high someone else in

the room was wondering the same thing. If something doesn't sit right with you, ask whether and how your concern was weighed; it's possible no one had thought of that yet. The only risk involved in asking questions about the workings of the church is that you will be invited to get more involved!

Rumors and gossip can destroy churches. James is not wrong about the power of the tongue, especially when fueled by hearts that are bitter or minds that have made unfair assumptions. Transparency is one of the tools we have to stop rumors before they begin. When everyone has access to the information, no one has the space (or hopefully the need) to make things up. When we cultivate the spiritual maturity to put integrity before our need for things to make sense, we can avoid filling in the gaps in our knowledge with false presumptions. This is how the Spirit calls us to carry ourselves in community with one another, as the body of Christ. This the one calling to which we have been called, the one faith we share. Let us give thanks for the Spirit's guidance as we build up the body in love! Hallelujah and Amen!