

Faultfinding, Nay-Saying, Nitpicking

John 12.1-8

This is the fifth Sunday in Lent. In today's lesson it's the Saturday night before a crowd lined the streets of Jerusalem to give Jesus a parade, throw palm branches in his path, and sing, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" (v. 13). In spite of that enthusiastic welcome, by the following Friday night, Jesus was in a grave.

In the few weeks leading up to this moment in time, it was increasingly evident that things were headed in that direction. There had been serious run-ins with the religious authorities. Jesus had predicted his death. And John told us there was already a plan to make his death a reality (8:21-30; 11:45-56).

On this particular Saturday evening, however, Jesus and the apostles took a respite from worry. They accepted an invitation to dinner in Bethany, a small crossroads village two miles from Jerusalem. Dinner was going to be at the home of Martha, her sister Mary, and their brother Lazarus.

All the people at the party already knew one another and the evening promised to be one of rest, relaxation, food, and fellowship. Lazarus is an old friend not only of Jesus, but at least a few of the apostle. Not all that long ago, Jesus altered his preaching schedule to go to Bethany and resuscitate Lazarus from the dead. On a different occasion, Jesus stopped for lunch at Martha's house and had a wonderful afternoon of conversation with Mary.

The evening delivered on its promises. As usual, the food Martha prepared was wonderful. The service impeccable. The conversation uplifting. It was a great night. But before Jesus and the apostles said their "good-byes," Mary slipped quietly out of the room and returned carrying an incredibly expensive jar of perfume.

It is reported to have been worth nearly a full year's wages. Mary broke the seal on the jar, knelt before Jesus, and washed his feet with the perfume. Our lesson tells us the fragrance of the perfume filled the house.

That is no benign observation. The smell of the ancient world was strong and offensive. Deodorants were unavailable. Bathing habits fell far short of our standard. There was no weekly garbage pick-up service. Raw sewage flowed freely in city streets rather than in underground pipes to a city waste treatment facility. Daily life in the ancient world was filled with unpleasant odors.

But on this particular night, Mary used perfume to express her thanks to Jesus for restoring life to Lazarus and for the friendship Jesus offered her. She wanted Jesus to experience the cool, comforting sensations of nard before he resumed his journey toward Golgotha.

And she accomplished that with this perfume that drove away every trace of bad smell in the room, replacing it with the fragrant scent of angels' breath.

But this holy moment ended abruptly. Judas Iscariot, the apostle who was to betray Jesus, spoke: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" I can imagine that remark was followed by an audible gasp.

What Judas said had an element of practical truth. Perfume worth a year's salary would buy truckloads of food and clothing for the poor. Stretching out a helping hand to

the poor is central to a meaningful practice of one's faith. By any reasonable standard, it was an over-the-top extravagance to spend that much money on foot washing.

On the other hand, that truth is irrelevant. Although incredibly important, responding to the plight of the poor was not on the agenda on this particular evening. This night was devoted to the physical and spiritual renewal of the dinner guests. And Mary's gesture was a magnanimous act of love and thanksgiving.

In spite of the truth in Judas' comment, what, when, and how he made his point belittled Mary's thoughtful gesture and transformed the mood at the dinner. The fragrant scent of a sweet, sweet spirit was sucked out of the room and replaced by the stench of moldy blanketing faultfinding.

This is not the only time Jesus experienced a negative comment destroying a special moment. Luke 4 talks about a weekend visit to his hometown of Nazareth when Jesus went to the synagogue to worship. When asked to speak, He read a short passage from the book of Isaiah that began, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."

When He finished, He rerolled the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, sat down, and shared briefly how that passage applied to Him. Luke said very explicitly that "all spoke well of him (Jesus) and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."

Almost immediately this "Welcome Home Jesus" atmosphere was interrupted by a fellow sitting on the back pew. (To paraphrase) "Hey, hold on a minute. Isn't this the guy who grew up on Carpenter Street? Isn't he one of Joseph's kids? I think he played on the same Little League team with my kid. Who does he think he is? How does he think he can lay claim to the prophecy of Isaiah? This Jesus is just like every other kid who grew up in Nazareth. There's nothing special about him."

There ensued a brief back and forth conversation between Jesus and the audience. And in a matter of minutes the attitude of the people in the synagogue went from wonderful to terrible. Those who "spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth" turned into a mob "filled with rage."

These angry people threatened to throw Jesus off a cliff at the edge of the city. **Such was the devastating possibility of one person making an offhand, negative, faultfinding remark.**

This still goes on today. All of us have been in situations where someone played the part of Judas at the dinner party in Bethany or the guy in the back pew at the Nazareth synagogue. Faultfinders who love to point out what's wrong with every person, every idea, and every situation. These are the nitpickers who complain about a mole hill problem until it becomes a mountain.

Collectively, I call these folks the "Aginners." It doesn't matter what it is, they are "against" it. "Againsters" are in every family, every church, every place of employment, every neighborhood. In advanced years they can be identified as the ones who grumble, "In my life I have seen thousands of changes and I have been 'against' every one of them."

Among the most readily identified groups who are really good at being negative are the talking heads on cable news and those who use websites and social media as platforms to launch attacks on people and ideas they don't like.

They live and breath in every political and ideological spectrum, each in his or her way mocking, belittling, and even mischaracterizing the worldviews, political opinions, and lifestyles of those who offend them.

This group not only seems to understand the devastating influence of nay-saying, faultfinding, and nitpicking, it is their stock in trade. Unfortunately, their collective intolerance contributes significantly to damaging the fragile social fabric that holds us together as a people.

The vast majority of those who are good at faultfinding, nay-saying, and nitpicking do not gain public notoriety. They are everyday people who just happen to be good at making negative comments. Sometimes they don't seem to fully understand the influence they have. In fact, sometimes I am not certain they are even aware they are "againsters."

I once knew a minister who was an "aginstster." Our paths crossed frequently in meetings, conferences, workshops, and social settings. This fellow had a remarkable ability to faultfind and nitpick. To illustrate, when a speaker finished and opened the meeting for questions, this fellow always had something to say.

Seldom were any of his comments positive though. Instead, he liked to point out factual errors and correct omissions in the presentation. He was very well-read and because of that he loved to articulate a counterpoint to the speaker's point. He also had a remarkable ability to spot the flaw in the speaker's thesis.

When I first met this fellow, I was impressed by his intelligence and analytical powers. In time I realized that being an "against" requires no special skill.

We live in an imperfect world filled with imperfect people. Every person, idea, and plan is less than perfect. It doesn't take any special gift to point that out. "Againsters" only tear things down, turn enthusiasm into carping, and poison the well with their negative commentary. Nitpicking, nay-saying, faultfinders seldom participate in the far more demanding task of making a positive contribution.

This minister was always polite. He was not angry in his demeanor. He didn't seem to hunger for the group's attention and seemed motivated only to perform a helpful service for the speaker and the group to set the record straight or share his opinion on the matter. I don't think he set out to join the ranks of Judas at the dinner party or the fellow on the back pew in Nazareth. Yet that's exactly what he did.

So how do we deal with the devastating influence of nay-saying, nitpicking, and faultfinding? Let me suggest three important principles.

First, don't underestimate the enormous amount of power wielded by the "aginner." With a raised eyebrow or a demeaning comment, a nasty letter to the editor, or a derogatory anonymous letter, an "aginner" can blow a worthwhile idea out of the water. He can suck the air out of the most self-confident person.

She can turn a crowd from cheering to jeering with an off-hand remark or a well placed comment. Don't underestimate the power of the negative.

Second, be aware that you and your words have that same power on other people. Your off-hand, unthinking remarks can be devastating to others. All of us are capable of saying things to people who love and respect us that hurt and demoralize them. We can justify it by claiming we were acting in that person's best interest. However, we need to keep in mind this unwelcome principle of our humanness.

Third, resist the temptation to establish your worth or your authority by being an “aginner.” It’s an easy expertise to develop, but it contributes very little to the common good.

We interact with “againsters” almost every day. They’re all around us. From time to time, most of us perform that function. We can’t do away with the authority of the “aginner,” but we can minimize it by being aware of the power we give to it.

May God grant to each of us the strength and wisdom to avoid joining the ranks of Judas and all the other unrestrained “againsters.” Instead may we seek and practice the wisdom of Proverbs: “Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.” (16:24)

Oh Lord, may it be so. Amen.