

“Hold Your Tongue”

There was a recent series of movies with the overarching title of *Kingsmen*. If you have not seen them, the concept was that there was a group of men and women who worked behind the scenes in espionage to protect the world, and especially Great Britain, from evil powers. They are similar to the “Mission: Impossible” movies or James Bond thrillers where there is a madman using his evil genius for nefarious ends. The Kingsmen must stop them without anyone knowing.

The front for the Kingsmen is a Bond Street gentlemen’s tailor called Kingsman. A man could go to Kingsman and get fitted for a traditionally tailored or bespoke suit. But if you were one of the Kingsmen, you knew the special code to get through to the back rooms, which were for high-level meetings and outfitting the agents with the weaponry that they needed. Like the “Men in Black” movies.

Colin Firth plays the lead character in the series. His character had an expertly tailored suit. You knew he was a man of quality and expertise by the way he dressed. One of his favorite sayings in the film is “clothes maketh the man.” He frequently uses that saying when he takes on a slovenly dressed villain. No matter how muscular or well-armed his opponent is, he is no match for the man in the Kingsman suit.

However, “clothes maketh the man” can be countered with another aphorism: “don’t judge a book by its cover.” Clothes maketh the man indicates that first impressions matter and we should be careful how we present ourselves. “Don’t judge a book by its cover” tells us that first impressions are not the whole story. For instance, once I gave a book to a highly educated friend, and he looked at the cover and told me it looked like a children’s book. It had been on the New York Times bestseller list and was on their list of the best novels of that year. But he wouldn’t even open it.¹

Jesus has another observation about people. He says it is not what goes in the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth. When he is speaking about what goes in the mouth, he is talking about food. Specifically, about the prohibitions in the Hebrew Scriptures’ food laws. The Pharisees, who were constantly at odds with Jesus, are berating him about his disciples eating foods that were prohibited and especially not washing their hands before eating. They sound a little bit like 1950s moms with the whole handwashing thing, but for the Pharisees, handwashing was a ritual of spiritual cleanliness rather than for cleaning away germs. It was not a bad idea, whether ritual or not, to wash your hands before eating, but most of Jesus’ disciples were working men. They ate when they had time, and that was

¹ *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* by Muriel Barbery

often in the midst of working. Much as today people eat lunch at their desks because they are so overtasked.

Jesus makes the point that whatever goes into the mouth, in regard to food or dirty hands, goes out via the sewer. That is, whatever might defile one in our food or food consumption practices will leave our bodies. Our bodies have a way of getting rid of it.

Conversely, what comes out of our mouths defiles us because it comes from the heart. When we use words that come out of our heart with “evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, and slander,” as well as gossip, we are defiled. Our intended target is not defiled despite our evil intent. Note that he did not include profanity in the list. It is not using indelicate language that is the problem. It is the lies that are intended to hurt other people, their reputation, or damage their ability to make a living that defile the speaker.

Of course, I am not suggesting that the use of profanity is a good thing or even something that Jesus would condone. Don’t think that for a minute. What he is most concerned about are the thoughts and actions that come from our heart. To Jesus, the heart is not just an organ that pumps blood; it is the center of our being. What comes from our heart indicates who we are and what is most important to us.

As an example, Jesus is saying that, despite having no proof, a person who starts a rumor about good and kind people has defiled themselves. Their target may be hurt for a while, but as another aphorism claims, “the truth will out,” and the defiler is defiled. Or someone may speculate on an individual’s difficulties, suggesting they have done something immoral. It may hurt them, but when the truth is revealed, once again the defiler is defiled.

There is another aphorism, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” That may be good for the playground, but in adult life the things we say can have devastating consequences. The mere accusation of something can ruin a person's reputation even if the accusation is false.

We speak too freely and easily. We let our tongues wag when we should keep silent. In the heat of the moment, we lose control. At other times, we speak with calculated intention and without proof, hoping to hurt someone. Remember, as Romey told us last week, silence is golden. The person who talks the most is often the least knowledgeable. Be wary of those who are certain; it is a show of limited knowledge and the inability to think critically.

Moms tell loud and rambunctious children to use their inside voice. Another admonition might be to use your church voice even when you are not in church. Speak as Jesus did, never hurting, always kind and forgiving. Let our voices be those of the undefiled.