

## **The Third Gate**

### **Sermon by the Rev. Art Lester**

Raise your hand if you'll be returning to your home country for Thanksgiving. How many of you have had bad experiences over the turkey and cranberry sauce, because you were sitting next to Uncle Bob or your sister-in-law, good citizens who just happen to be Trump voters or members of Qanon?

It's getting harder to talk to each other—have you noticed? You'd think that now that everyone has a smartphone that it would get easier. If you don't get my meaning, just have a look at what's been happening in Congress, not to mention the British Parliament, a place whose very name means a place to talk. Lips are moving, tongues wagging, but it seems there's not a lot of real communication going on.

Things are getting even worse back in my home country. The lack of communication has solidified into what is being called "culture war." It was a "cold" culture war until the insurrection at the national Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>. Now even reasonable people are speaking to and about each other in such polarised ways that we would not have believed it possible until just a few years ago. Wisdom, especially in speech, seems to have flown the coop. And it's not just in the streets, unfortunately; it's in our homes and neighbourhoods and even at the Thanksgiving table.

We may think this is a new problem, but it's been around for almost as long as the written word.

There's an ancient proverb that is often quoted when matters of wise speech come up. It has variously been attributed to the Buddha, Socrates,

Confucius and Shakespeare. For all I know, it's attributed to Bob Dylan. It goes something like this:

Before speaking, pass your words through three gates. The first gate should be obvious to us, who have been told since childhood not to lie: *Is what you say true?*

The question "Is it true?" isn't as straightforward as it might sound. Often, we say something is true when it's really just a strongly held opinion. One example might be something you hear from some politicians: "Marijuana use leads on to heroin addiction." The people who say this believe it's true, because most heroin users have formerly used cannabis. But research has shown that there is no link that can be demonstrated, other than both things happening in an illegal culture.

Right there, we get stuck in the first gate. In order to make that statement pass through we would have to modify it like this, "I worry that cannabis use will lead to hard drug addiction." That statement passes the test. It also opens up room for negotiation; it is not a truth cast in stone. By allowing a touch of humility into the argument. It humanises it. It can't be disputed as untrue. By saying it, you are not demanding a solution in law; you are asking for concern for your fear.

Of course, there are certain things which ARE true, not just the product of opinion. A big current example of this is the reality of climate change. I say "reality" instead of "debate", because, even though there are those who argue against it, science has properly put a cork in it. But to claim that people who disagree are liars with vested interests, or pathological deniers-- even to imply this-- is to once again fail at the first gate. If something is true, it is true in its own terms, not reliant on the falsehood of opponents.

Which brings us to the second of the three gates: "Is it necessary?"

If someone asks you if they look fat in a certain pair of jeans, you can't just rely on the first gate. If someone asks if you liked their over-salted lasagne, which you dutifully shovelled down at their table, does it matter if what you say is true? We have entered the realm of the "little white lie." It is here that the question of necessity comes to the front of the queue.

Most of us, I'm sure would rely on tact at this point. But, for the sake of argument, what if the person does look unusually obese, along with signs of fatigue, and the question of diabetes rears its head. Or what if you are able to detect in the beef signs of decay or spoilage, and you fear you and your host might fall ill? In those cases, isn't it the case that the silence or the white lie is the greater evil?

One of my heroes was a man called John Woolman, who lived in the frontier state of Ohio in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He was a Quaker, a cloth merchant by trade, who was known for his humility and kindness. Over some years of effort and negotiation, relations with a tribe of American Indians—whose land had been taken by settlers—had become balanced and more or less peaceful. Then another merchant moved into the settlement and upset the balance by selling guns and whisky to the indigenous population.

This led to new problems of violence, as the native population had no history of what was called "fire water", and, hence, no way of controlling drunken behaviour. To make it worse, there had been episodes of random shooting and rioting, as the frustrations of being displaced by foreign settlers infected the tribe. Woolman and the other Quakers were worried. Despite their Quakerly efforts at fairness and peace-making, they faced a newly violent frontier.

Unable to protect themselves, because they didn't use firearms, it was decided that the bravest among them, Woolman, should approach the new merchant and prevail upon him to stop creating havoc. But the man had a fearsome reputation; he had been known to be violent himself.

One morning, Woolman went to the merchant's door. As he stood waiting, he experienced a feeling of shame, because he was judging the behaviour of another. This was, in his opinion, a violation of the Gospels. His shame increased until he burst into tears, so that when the scary merchant opened his door, Woolman was sobbing. In this Quaker story, the man was so struck by Woolman's humility that he sought to comfort him. He invited him inside, where they spent a long time discussing the Bible and the peaceful message of the Society of Friends. In the end, the merchant agreed to stop selling booze and guns and joined the Quakers.

It's hard to separate myth from fact in this tale, but parts of it ring true. Woolman had passed through the first gate and had staked his life on the second. It WAS necessary to do something to stop what was clearly a problem for everyone. What he did exemplifies the bigger question: was it better than the silence?

What made Woolman cry on the merchant's doorstep leads us to the neighbourhood of the third gate, one that is often overlooked: Is it kind?

I think I'll have to paraphrase Tina Turner now: "What's kindness got to do with it?" I mean, after all, if something is true and it's necessary, does it matter how it makes the other person feel?

In important matters like Indian attack and affairs of state, surely it's enough to be factual. Kindness would be an extra, but not essential. But the sages of all generations who repeat the three-gate motto point to something that is too often left out of dialogue. Winning at all costs does just that—create costs. Making kindness an essential part of wise speech points to the larger, unstated point: we will have to live together when all this is over. There is no peace—as we all have reason to know—in merely winning. There are far more important things at stake than fleeting issues.

In times like these, when the US has seemingly divided into two warring camps and Europe is trembling on the edge of new, far right governments, we had better learn to pay attention. Failure of communication is not just inconvenient: it can be fatal.

So let's go back to the third gate, to make your speech *kind*. If you look that word up in a standard dictionary, you might be surprised to see that it's first listed as a noun. Kind, meaning a grouping of similar things, as in a kind of footwear, or sculpture or business. It is linked to the idea of kin, or kinship, and that provides our first clue. Attempting to be kind means attempting to lodge yourself in similarity with the other. Kinship.

Seen as an adjective, the word brings us into the more familiar territory of behaviour. There it means something like caring, compassionate—polite, even. I helped a young mother collect her spilled groceries one morning as she stood on the sidewalk with two wailing toddlers. "You're very kind," she told

me afterwards. But I thought, “Am I? Would I have been so helpful if the two little ones were shouting on the next seat on the bus? My kindness was nothing more than anyone short of a sociopath would do. It makes me want to protect the word kind. To make it more crucial to human interaction. I think that if kindness really is the third gate that it needs to be more than mere politeness or formalism.

Combining the two elements of the word, kind speech would be speech that comes from a sense of kinship with the other: “We’re two of a kind.” We may find ourselves in different, even warring camps, but look at how much we really are like each other. This is the root of that elusive idea called empathy. Getting into the shoes of the other, feeling at least something of what they do.

Saying: “You know what—we’re not so very different, you and I. Not in the deep places, where the heart—not the mind—holds sway.

All this sounds efficient. Effective, even. A how-to guide to improving communication. But isn’t it even simpler than that? Can’t kindness just spring naturally from us? Who would benefit- us or them?

Let’s listen to the advice of the Dalai Lama, when asked about spiritual practice—about meditation, chanting, giving alms—he smiled and said, “Just be kind.”

So... Say pass the cranberry sauce, please. And smile.

AMEN