

How To Avoid Criticism

Sermon, October 11, 2020

Text: Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philipians 3:15 – 4:9

American author Elbert Hubbard was born 1856, and died May 7, 1915; he was on board the Lusitania when it was sunk. Although his works are not widely known, he was a highly quotable author; two of his quotes I'm using this morning were gleaned from a list of some 425 poignant quotes from his pen, some of which you've probably heard in other contexts. (See https://www.azquotes.com/author/6978-Elbert_Hubbard)

The first is this, *"To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing."*

You've all seen the sermon title; well, that's how you avoid criticism. Amen. Let's close in prayer (*just kidding*).

Tomorrow we honor a man who was the brunt of much criticism in his day, and the brunt of a renewed and somewhat vitriolic criticism in recent years. Tomorrow is the 528th anniversary of the date the Genoese mariner sailed the *"...ocean blue in fourteen hundred and ninety-two"* and arrived at the New World (*and, happily, Columbus Day Monday actually falls on Columbus Day this year!*). On October 12, 1882, the 390th anniversary of that arrival, the Catholic organization "Knights of Columbus" was founded in New Haven, CT by Father Michael J. McGivney to promote *"... the ideals of charity, unity, fraternity, and patriotism."* Initially, KOC was largely about providing assistance to the widows and children left behind when the family breadwinner died, often prematurely; life was not easy for Catholic immigrants of the time. The Order's top-rated insurance program continues to do so to this day; also, individual Knights give on average more than 10 million hours of their time a year to assist sick and/or disabled members and their families. Ten years later, October 12, 1892, the 400th anniversary, by Presidential Proclamation # 335 of President Benjamin Harrison, the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag was first used during Columbus Day observances in the public schools. One hundred years later, October 12, 1992, was the "quincentenary", the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus arrival to the Americas (*can't believe that was 28 years ago!*)

I vividly remember on that quincentenary celebration there was a flood of Christopher Columbus material in magazines and newspaper Op Ed pages, and very little of it was complimentary. Professor Frank Gerrity, from St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, was an exception to the snarky rule. He wrote a Columbus Day 1992 editorial entitled **"Give Columbus His Due,"** of which I quote in part: *"Poor Christopher Columbus! Toppled from his perch as mythic hero, he has become the scapegoat for racial, ethnic and colonial malcontents and at least half the ills of the modern world. So much so that when Spain asked the United Nations General Assembly to proclaim the 500th Anniversary of Columbus' epic voyage, the "Year of Discovery," there were such howls of protest from the delegates that the Spanish government withdrew its request."* Dr. Gerrity went on to write that despite what the critical commentators may write, a truly objective historian would have to note Christopher Columbus as a heroic figure of genuine historical significance. He described Columbus as an indomitable man who had the strength of his convictions and was passionately committed to the realization of what he sincerely believed to be a divinely-given vision.

Columbus himself wrote extensively regarding this vision in his autobiographical 1501 book entitled The Book Of Prophecies (*written after or during his third voyage to the Americas, a reproduction of the mostly Spanish manuscript with an English translation is available on Amazon.com for only \$454.62 Hurry; at that price, I'm sure it won't last!*) Columbus wrote how he was convinced by God and Scripture that a westward voyage to Asia could be done, he solicited support from the kings of Portugal, England and France, only to encounter opposition and even derisive laughter from royal maritime advisors; the secular know-it-alls of the day basically dismissed him as a religious lunatic devoted to an antiquated view of the Bible. Undaunted, this man with a vision doggedly persisted, and finally gained the financial support of Isabella; a monarch who shared his passionate faith and who was willing to financially support his vision and mission. Professor Gerrity continues:

"Once funded, an indomitable Columbus hazarded his life and reputation, plotted his courses to the prevailing winds, pushed his crews to their maximum effort, resisted all efforts to induce him to turn back and was finally vindicated." -- "He accomplished something far more important than even he ever knew. He had actually stumbled onto a 'New World,' and both worlds, new and old, would never be the same again. [He] merits the title 'discoverer' for bringing the western hemisphere and its peoples into the orbit of world history. No single identifiable historical person had done as much. Unlike the Norse settlements of 500 years before that had faded into the texts of Icelandic sagas with no historical impact, Columbus' voyages set off a chain of actions and reactions that continue to influence the course of history to this day. [His contemporary critics] nitpick at Columbus' ambition, pettiness and occasional cupidity but ignore his nobility, his sincere piety and his breadth of vision. In history, goods are rarely unalloyed and evils seldom undiluted. So it is with Columbus and his legacy."

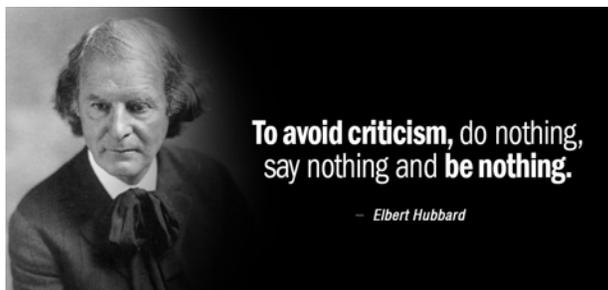
Again, Mr. Hubbard's quote: *"To avoid criticism, say nothing, do nothing, be nothing."* Well, Christopher Columbus certainly was not one to avoid criticism. You may remember the 10-90 principle: 10% of life is made up of what happens to you. 90% of life is decided by how you react. We really have no control over 10% of what happens to us. But we do have a measure of control over how we will respond, and how we respond can have a profound effect over everything else that follows. The legacy of Christopher Columbus tells us he did well with his 90%.

As did the writer of today's Scripture lesson, who wrote this while in prison near the end of his life. You might think a driven, Type-A personality like the apostle Paul would have gone crazy and even bitter having to spend so much time in prison. Talk about lockdowns and social distancing! But it was while he was in prison he used his time to write the epistles to the Philippians, Ephesians, and Colossians, each written with some of his most tender words. There is just no trace of resentment, bitterness, anger, or faith-less cynicism in these prison epistles, with words such as *"for me to live is Christ, to die is gain"*, as we read last week. We may think at times we are in the wrong place, but even the wrong place can be the right place, if we are faithful to Jesus Christ, Who is every place. Paul believed where ever we are of use to God is the right place for us to be. He writes, *"Join with others in following my example; take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, [for] their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame."*

That brings me to the second Elbert Hubbard quote of the day: *"We are punished by our sins, not for them."*

To paraphrase, it's not so much that we are punished *for* our sins that it is we are punished and hurt *by* our sins. For Elbert Hubbard, what theology may call punishment, nature calls consequences. God's ways are good ways; but going against them leads to destructive consequences and destinies. When our appetites control us, rather than we controlling our appetites, bad things happen. When we serve our cravings rather than serving God, destruction so often takes place. *"Their destiny is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame."* This is almost another sermon, but isn't it true that so many things which used to be considered shameful are now portrayed as glorious and even noble? Paul continues, *"... with [their] minds set on earthly things (i.e., they just can't see beyond this world!), but our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body."* And, that transformation begins right here in this life ... by Jesus' power we are enabled to change as we come under His control ... a process that is completed in heaven. The theologians call this "sanctification."

Not only is Paul in prison, but he is very near the end of his life. He has made many choices, he has accumulated many experiences over his life span. He has also distilled a lot of wisdom about what's really important. So we would do well to pay attention when this old apostle writes these final words. He continues, *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all."* One of the final things this wise old apostle is telling us to let gentleness be evident. This probably isn't the legacy one would have expected Paul to be advocating. After all, in his lifetime he was a high achieving, goal-oriented missionary who planted churches all over the Roman Empire. This was a man not afraid of conflict; more than once he left town with a shower of rocks behind him. Like Columbus, he didn't live by the motto *"to avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing."* Paul had a strong and intense personality, and was never shy about what he believed to be right. And upon reflection over all his years of achieving, and striving, and fighting and encouraging, one legacy he believes most important to leave behind is the legacy of gentleness. To be clear, for Paul, gentleness is not weakness. Gentleness is strength under control; it is strength and determination channeled for good purposes. It is synonymous with true meekness ... Jesus is the epitome of meekness, gentleness; tremendous power and might that is under control for good and saving and redemptive purposes. In fact, I think Paul would assert it is only the strong who can be genuinely gentle; only the strong and the confident can really choose to be a gentleman, a gentlewoman.



He continued, *"Finally, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable -- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy -- think about such things."* Note that Paul did NOT write: *"Whatever is false, whatever is dishonorable, whatever is wrong, whatever is impure, whatever is ugly, whatever is disreputable, if anything is immoral or contemptible, spend your time and energy fighting about and/or avoiding such things."* No, Paul's thrust is positive. Do you want to be a gentle man, a gentle woman? Then think about and put into practice what is good. Choose to focus your energies on what is admirable and right and noble and lovely and praiseworthy;

encourage it, talk about it, promote it, and *do* good as much and as often as you have opportunity ... and don't live simply to avoid criticism; live in such a positive and productive way that you transcend criticism and inspire others to do the same. Focus on what is good. Encourage what is good. Work hard to produce, encourage and grow what is good. Praise and encourage and cultivate what is good in others. And all this has a way of flowering into the fruit of genuine gentleness.

The final thing I want to say is that I believe the church is to be that place where true gentleness is fostered. It is not the place to learn how to avoid criticism; it is not a place where we are encouraged to do nothing, say nothing, be nothing. The church is to be that place where God can be encountered, that place where parents can receive help to raise children to know and do what is good, faithful, excellent and praiseworthy; in short, the church is to be THE place where good is defined, fed, taught, practiced, modeled *and* encouraged, leaving a legacy of gentle faithfulness which will reap benefits now and for generations to come. Next to helping others place their hands in the saving grip of Jesus' hands, perhaps the most vital duty of the church is to encourage and promote and teach and endeavor to do what is good, wholesome, upright, honorable and pleasing to God, and thus leaving the lasting legacy of gentleness.