

Chaplain's Bulletin September 21, 2025



Dear Folks,

I once saw a bumper sticker that said, “No Farms No Food.” My first thought was that this person wants to abolish all the farms so we will all starve to death. What a mean person! Then I thought this person wants us to appreciate farms because without them we wouldn’t have food. That was a much better thought.

Did you hear about the man who stared intently at the can of orange juice because it said, “Concentrate.” One man said, “My hair needs cutting really badly,” and I said, “I can cut it really badly.” Just because we understand the words doesn’t mean we really understand what the person is saying. In the seminary, one Bible scholar told us that to understand what is being said we must “listen with our hearts. “He said that if you go into a shop to buy blades for your razor and the woman behind the counter says, “Can I help you, honey?” The word “honey” really doesn’t mean anything. However, if a man is speaking to the love of his life, he might be pouring his whole soul into the word “honey.” If our hearts are filled with anger and hostility, we will naturally hear things in the worst possible way. Let’s be honest; when we really dislike someone, we want to hear bad things about him, just as when we really like someone, we like to hear good things about him. How can that not shade the way we listen? When people put out some snippets of what someone supposedly said, and then claim they are terrible people, I don’t think that will be as persuasive as they think. In fact, a lot of what people say is expressed in such a way that it guarantees no one is going to be persuaded unless they already agree.

People have talked about toning down the rhetoric. I don’t think that’s enough. I think we need to learn how to have more effective rhetoric. My ability to have dialog has improved a great deal over the course of years, and though it doesn’t always produce good results (Jesus had the same problem, and I’m not going to do better than Jesus), I have had many more good outcomes than I used to. Whatever else you believe about Charlie Kirk, he was very good at that kind of dialog, which is what made him so successful. What if we all learned more about how to do that?

More effective rhetoric is an art. We must be aware of how we sound to others. The words we say sound more benign to us than similar words said back to us, so two people, speaking in the same way, can each believe that the other person is being cruel while we are innocent. I suggest that listening well is harder than we think, and we have to get better at it. James 1:19 teaches us to be “quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.” What If we, as a society, decided that if we thought some people were headed in the wrong direction, we trusted more in the power of dialog than in name calling, shouting someone down, and violence?

What if we put more energy and effort into trying to understand and not being too quick to believe we understand enough? What if we focused less on who was a good person and who was a bad person and focused more on how we can all be better people? Every day is a chance to learn something new, and every day is a chance to become a better person. Jesus said we must strive for perfection and cannot be content with less (Matthew 5:48).

Blessings,
Fr. Jim