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I ask that you will please use my words now to speak to us and to bless my brothers and sisters. In Jesus' name, amen. Well, good morning. I thought that piano piece was beautiful. I really loved it. As many of you know, in addition to being the interim pastor here, I'm on the Pastor Search Committee. And where these two duties of mine intersect, I find myself wondering what should I be doing up here as I give a message to help us to prepare and be ready for our incoming pastor. And as I think about this and I wonder about this, I realize that this could kind of be our John the Baptist time. Now, John the Baptist in Matthew chapter 3 was described as someone who was commissioned by God to make straight the paths of the Lord. And I wonder, and I have no good answer, why God would, the creator of heaven and earth, Almighty God, would use a human to make straight his paths to prepare the way for him. That kind of boggles my mind. And I don't know if he needed the way prepared or if he just chose to have it prepared, but I smile and I take hope in the idea that our God uses us frail, weak humans to accomplish and carry out his will. And that encourages me. But if the Son of God can make better use of having the way prepared for him, then how much more can our incoming pastor? So I started thinking, how can we as a church prepare the way? How can we be ready so that when he gets here, everything can hit the ground running, as they say. When I took this job, I had a couple people come to me and say, "Time to hit the ground running." And I want us to be ready to do that when our next pastor comes in. So I've also been hearing some of you thinking along those same lines. At the administrative council meeting this past week, we were talking about how we had started making changes to our church operations manual, and we had never gotten those finalized. And we're like, "Let's get that finished before our new pastor gets here." And I've had people stop into my office, and they give me all kinds of ideas. Some people just little tiny ideas like, "Let's make our church event planning calendar online so that it's digital, so that people can see it from their home on their computer." To massive changing ideas like, "Let's reevaluate our church mission statement." Or, "Let's discuss our membership process and how people become members." And I'm not here to discuss any of those ideas, but it shows that all of you, or some of you at least, are thinking about, "Let's not have this new pastor get here and have a mess waiting for him. Let's get ready. Let's be prepared for him to come." But many of those changes that I just talked about are left to committees or to the church secretary or certain individuals. What can we as a church do? The idea that popped into my head was to deal with the little foxes. Song of Solomon, or it might be Song of Songs, depending on your book, your version of the Bible, chapter 2, 15, says, "Catch for us the little foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines." Now, I'm going to probably be talking about this verse out of context, and I want to make that clear up front. I have not studied Song of Solomon or Song of Songs, and I don't know exactly...it's a book of poetry and it's a love poem, and I know that it is a great image of Jesus' love for his church. But as for this particular verse and what the meaning was, I'm not clear, but I'm using this verse as just a place to glean wisdom from, just kind of like the way you go to a movie and you see Bilbo Baggins do something wise and you say, "Oh, that was very wise. I could apply that to my life." That's how I'm using this verse today. "Catch for us the little foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines." Little foxes spoil the vines. First of all, what are the vines? Well, what are vines? Vines, at least in this context, is places where grapes grow. Grapes grow on vines. My grandparents who live out in Rockville, they had a very small little section of vineyard that they planted in their backyard. It wasn't longer than from me to that wall. It was just metal frame on each end with wires that run between it and they plant grape seeds along the base and the vines of the grapes grow up and grow and cover up the whole framework. Then once a year, little bunches of grapes start sprouting up. My brother and I would run over and squish the grapes between our fingers and get in trouble. Because those grapes were there to be fruitful and we were destroying their fruitfulness. So in this verse, metaphorically, the little foxes that spoil the vines, the vines are a place of fruitfulness. We want to be fruitful. That's a very common phrase. In the Bible, when it talks about the Holy Spirit working in us and making changes in us to improve our lives, it's called the fruit of the Spirit. God changes us so that we can produce fruit through the Holy Spirit. We want to be fruitful. We want to produce good fruit as opposed to bad fruit. We want to produce lots of good fruit. But the little foxes spoil the vines. They sabotage our ability to be fruitful. The little foxes are bad and we want to catch them and get rid of them. The second thing I want to point out before I start talking about these little foxes is that they're little. The verse doesn't say, "Slave for us the great three-headed fox beast that terrorizes the village." No, it just says, "Catch the little foxes." If you look on the front of your bulletin, I think I got one right here. There's a cute little fox on the front. Gail found that for me. That's adorable. One of the kids back there said we should name him George Fox. I thought that was funny. But it's adorable. There's probably websites on the Internet dedicated to cute pictures of foxes. But they're trouble. They're trouble because they spoil our fruitfulness. I want to point out that some of the things that we talk about in your life might seem very minor, very innocent, just like a little character flaw. But they're going to spoil your fruitfulness. You must catch them and you must deal with them. So what are the little foxes? Let's get to that. What is it that we must deal with? I have some ideas, and I'm sure I don't have all of them, but I've got a few. I've got probably enough time to talk about two of them today, so that's a good place to start. We're going to start with gossip. What is gossip and what does God think of gossip? Well, I searched in the Bible. I used digital Bible so I can quickly search. I did a search for the word gossip in the New King James version. It came back with one response. The word gossip only appears once in the New King James. In fact, it's gossips plural. But I was like, well, either we're blowing this whole gossip thing way out of proportion or I'm missing something. So I flipped over to the NIV and it appears ten times in the NIV. I'm like, well, that's better. I cross-referenced the two and I realized that in the New King James it uses the phrase "tail-bearer" a lot instead of "gossip." So, "tail-bearer," "gossip." I started looking at the Greek and Hebrew words behind the words that are being translated "gossip" and "tail-bearer" and this kind of thing. I have a few now and I'm going to try and pronounce them because that's fun. First, in Hebrew, we have "rakhil," which is a slanderer, a tail-bearer, or an informer. And we also have "nirgan," which is to murmur, whisper, or backbite. In the Greek, this is the hardest one. One of the words is "sethrismas," which is whispering, as in secretly slandering someone behind their back. But that word also can mean the murmuring of a snake charmer. I thought that was cool. And then we have "fluareyo," which is to utter nonsense, make empty charges, or accuse one falsely with malicious words. But as I was doing all this research, there was a little footnote there that said, "Oh, you're looking for gossip? You should do a study on the tongue." And let me tell you, the Bible has plenty to say about the tongue. But I did find one verse that I think kind of summed up everything I want to say about gossip pretty well. And that's in Proverbs chapter 6, verses 16 through 19. It should be in your bulletin. It says, "These six things the Lord hates." And actually, I'm going to pause right there. And in case any of you are still under the misconception that we have this kind of hippie, feel-good, new-age God, there are things He hates, and the Bible says so, and we're going to talk about some of those today. He is also a God of love. Don't get me wrong, but you can't love unless you also hate the things that are against the things you love. Make sense? It's a whole other sermon. I'm going to save it. "These six things the Lord hates. Yes, seven are an abomination to Him." Strong words. "A proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among the brethren." It doesn't say "the" brethren. I don't know if you noticed, but three out of the seven of those all come from the tongue. "A lying tongue, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren." Those last two very much fit our idea of gossip, of someone who is spreading a false witness, who is spreading lies about someone behind their back, and also someone who is sowing discord, and you're saying things that cause division. My personal definition of gossip is just a little more vague, a little more catch-all, and I say gossip is anything that I say that hurts another. It's intentionally vague because I could say something that physically hurts you. Like if I said something that got you beat up, then you physically hurt. It could be semi-literal, like if I said something that got you fired from your job. But most often, gossip hurts relationships and reputations. Here I am, assuming the best about a person, and you come up to me and say, "Oh, did you hear about so-and-so?" "She won't even speak to her daughter anymore." I don't need to hear that. You know? And relationships and reputations. We hurt others in order to build ourselves up. We start doing it in elementary school and we never stop. We want people to see that we are clever, and that we're informed, and that we have our pulse on the beat of everything that's going on. We like that, we like when people's eyes light up because we've told them something. And we find our value in the things that we know. Somehow, the further you are up the gossip chain, the better you feel about yourself. If you're the first person with a piece of gossip, you feel like the king of the world. You start telling people, and then other people come back to you and then you say, "Did you hear about so-and-so?" And you're like, "Yes, I did." "You feel great because you already heard that gossip." "Oh, but it feels terrible when you're the last one to hear the gossip, isn't it?" And we rank ourselves, we rank our personal value with how far we are up the gossip chain, how soon, you know. You go to gossip to someone and you're like, "Oh yeah, I know that." You just feel terrible. Like, "Oh man, everyone already knows. I was the last to find out." And you're offended, and meanwhile the person you're talking about is just getting their reputation, you know, drugged through the mud and their dirty laundry aired. Do you see the problem is twofold. You're not loving your neighbor. You're not loving that person who you're slandering. But the other problem is that you're using a worldly standard to define your self-worth. You're using this gossip chain system to find your value and your sense of self-worth. And the Bible calls it an abomination and says the Lord hates it. So, stop. I have a little test to see if I'm about to speak gossip, a little test that I use. I ask myself, "Would I be saying what I'm about to say if that person I'm talking about was standing right here in front of me?" And I've been doing this a lot lately, not gossiping, but asking myself this question. If I need to talk about another person, I think, "Okay, if they're standing here right now, how would I phrase this?" And sometimes I need to change the way I phrase it to be more loving and graceful. And sometimes it's like there's just absolutely no way that if this person was standing here, I would say this. And that is totally the red flag that you're about to speak gossip. I have a dream, and it's not quite as lofty as other "I have a dream" speeches, but it's a good dream. My dream is that our next pastor comes into this church and he does not ever hear a single piece of dirt about any previous pastor, about any previous member, or about any current member. That is my dream. And I think it's really great, and I want it to happen. I want them to come in, and I don't want them to know any of the mistakes and the shortcomings and the weaknesses of anyone who used to be here or anyone who is here. And I've had some very well-intentioned, well-meaning people come to me since I've taken the office and say stuff like, "I'm so glad you do this and that. Craig never used to do this and that." And it's like, "I don't want to hear that. I don't need to hear that." And if Craig was here, you wouldn't be saying that. If you give me a compliment, if you say, "Matt, I'm going to make something up." Matt, I love that you have a candy bowl on your desk. And almost no one takes my candy, by the way, and I don't understand that. But help yourself. But if you say, "Matt, I love that you have candy on your desk. That's fantastic. And I feel great because I've done something. I've made a decision that blesses you and makes you happy." But then if you say, "Craig never kept candy on his desk." And I'm like, "See, you just stolen that compliment from me because now I realize you're not trying to make me feel good. You're trying to make yourself seem special and important for presenting this information and showing how smart you are." And that just steals it from me. And also God hates it. What if our next pastor never heard any of it? What if every word we spoke about everyone was a word about them that edified and glorified them? What if that was the kind of people we are? Of course we live in a society that complains and gossips and stuff. And what if we were a people set apart from that? What if we were different? What if we only talked about the good stuff about people behind our back and never the bad stuff? And some of you are thinking, "Well, sometimes you have to talk about the bad stuff." No, you really don't. The times that you say, "Oh, pray for so-and-so because her marriage is getting rocky." And that's still gossip. Even if you couch it with "pray for them because" it's still gossip. If I need to know about their marriage troubles, then either they will come and tell me or God will arrange me to walk into a situation where it is made clear to me. Those are the two times that I will find out that I need to know about somebody's personal problems. I don't need to hear it from you. Unless that person has specifically said, "Go to the pastor and tell them this." Or go to whoever in the church, doesn't have to be the pastor. Unless someone has specifically sent you out to say something, then keep it to yourself. Don't speak evil. Don't speak whether they're true or false. Don't air other people's dirt for them. So can we do that? Can we make everything we say about another person, whether they're in this church or whether they're in our family or whether they're in Washington, D.C. or whatever? Can we speak words of life and completely abandon the little dirty secrets and the words of death? Can we do that? Psalm 19.14 says, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord." The words of my heart and the meditation of my heart. If you really think you have a problem with gossip and you think you need to deal with it, the first place to start dealing with it is in your heart. If you start changing your thinking about your brothers and sisters to thinking about the good things about them, and if you know something bad about someone, just use it as an excuse to quietly, privately pray for them in your prayer closet. And don't spread it around. But practice thinking those graceful, loving thoughts. Colossians 4.6, "Let your speech always be with grace." If you think little or less of someone, let it remain a mystery. If someone ever manages to find out that you had a poor opinion of someone, they should be shocked. Really? They had a poor opinion of that person? I didn't realize that because behind their back they kept saying the most loving, kind, wonderful things. If someone, you know, if me and a fellow are talking about you and that fellow says, "Who do you think that person really doesn't care for?" I want to be able to say, "I have no idea." Because they talk about everyone behind their back with the love that they show to Jesus. I think I'm going to end it right there, actually. I was going to move on and talk about pride, but I think that is a good place to stop and think about. Listen to yourself this week. Listen to the words you say when you're talking about someone else. And after you're done having a conversation, just say, "Why did I say that? Did the things I just say come out of a heart of love for that other person? Am I truly, honestly caring about that person?" The irony is that a lot of times those of us who say, "Pray for so and so because whatever," we're just gossiping, and at the end of the day we don't pray for them ourselves. We just use that whole pray for them thing as an excuse to gossip. So I encourage you to evaluate your words this week and also be thinking about what other little foxes may be in our lives. There's a whole list I didn't get to, like pride and prayerlessness and worry and unforgiveness and there's plenty to talk about. But I'm just going to stop there because you have plenty to chew on, and I'm going to close in prayer. Heavenly Father, God, we want to have real love. We want to be a people pleasing to you. We want the words of our mouth and the meditations of our heart to be acceptable in your sight. We want this church to be a light that shines in contrast to the gossip and the backbiting that exists in our world and in our city. We want people to remark at how much love and grace comes out of our mouth towards other. We don't want there to be even a single drop of poison on our tongues. And so, God, I pray now for each one of my brothers and sisters here that you will shine your light into our hearts. Help us to search our hearts. Help us to shine that light on all the nooks and crannies of everything we say. Help us to reevaluate every word. Help those words to come off our lips as an act of worship to you. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.