



Address at Morning Prayers, Memorial Church, Harvard University, 1990.

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Morning Prayers April 5, 1990

Bible text: Samuel 25.23-25 and 32-35

Was I too discrete in not raising this matter? Was I indiscreet in bringing up that one? Did I betray a confidence when I said this? Or, shouldn't I have said that while there was still time?

Such doubts often run through my mind, as I expect they do through everyone's, both after personal conversations and after business meetings. Because they are questions that concern many of us fairly often, I would like to speak this morning on the topic of discretion—discretion in the sense in which it appears, for instance, in the Prayer Book of 1962, where we read: “A good man is merciful, and lendeth: and will guide his words with discretion. For he shall never be moved” (112:5)

By training I am a philologist (which I hope means a lover of words and not a lover of wordiness!). Accordingly, I will begin by pondering the meaning and origins of the terms “discretion” and “discreet.” The quality of discretion is often associated with prudence and circumspection. A person who is discrete shows restraint in speech and conduct. Etymologically discretion comes from a Latin verb that means to separate or to distinguish. Its main root means “to sift.”

Especially inside the University people spend much of their days sifting words. Although some could contend that what marks homo sapiens apart from mere animals—from dumb animals—is the prehensile thumb, I would agree that the power of speech is an equally important determinant of humanness. To take a scriptural example, the tongue contributed as much to the Fall as did the thumb: Eve *talked* with the serpent before she took the apple.

The power of words is widely recognized outside the Bible in proverbs such as “the pen is mightier than the sword.” But as these sayings imply, words are weapons that can cut two ways. If words are swords, they must be drawn and sheathed with discretion. They are missiles that cannot be stopped once they have been launched. As a Roman poet put it, “a word once sent forth can never be recalled.” In this sense discretion is the lid on the Pandora's Box of speech.

Loose lips *do* sink ships. But simply clamping mouths shut is only one aspect of discretion, because the dangers of silence equal or even outweigh the dangers of speech. It is *tight* lips, not loose lips, that allow the hateful and intolerant to proceed from wicked words to wicked deeds, from vituperation to concentration camps.

Discretion, then, is the judgment that encourages us to consider the differences between information and disinformation, whistleblowing and tattletaleing, chatting and gossiping. At the

same time, it is the judgment that encourages us to speak out after we have so considered. Once again, it is a sifting, which suggests that being “like a sieve” is not always bad.

The kind of discretion I have in mind is an elusive and old-fashioned concept, but like many elusive and old-fashioned things it has an enduring utility and charm. The kind of discretion I have in mind was known in the Middle Ages as “the mother of virtues.” This kind of discretion is not to be thrown to the winds, for this kind of discretion, perhaps precisely because it is so difficult to grasp, is truly the better part of valor. Thank you.