

It's actually not that big of a deal. It was only one tree. Out of all the hundreds of thousands of trees in the world what difference does one tree make anyway?

If there was a problem at all, it was with me. You see I had planted that tree in my front yard. About five or six years ago our cedar tree died for no apparent reason, leaving a space in the yard that just begged for another tree. So, my daughter went down to the city park where they were giving away little sticks with no roots, claiming the whole time when planted they would grow into nice big oak trees.

To say the least, I was skeptical. I was so skeptical, in fact, I asked my daughter to pick up two of them so we would have a 50/50 chance of one of them living and filling this space in the front yard. I planted them about six feet apart and I'm sure I looked rather humorous, digging two very small holes in the ground and planting these sticks. I had visions of my neighbors peering out their windows, pointing at me, and laughing at the sight. They were just two sticks planted in the yard with no fertilizer, no magic growing potion, and in the general area where my other tree had just died. It was a recipe for failure, and failure was what I was expecting.

But to my surprise both sticks struggled through the spring and summer and made it into the fall. Then came winter and when spring came around again, lo and behold, both trees were growing and there were even a few very small branches forming. As the trees grew I found myself wanting to look over at the neighbor's house with this sort of sneer on my face as if to say, "I knew you thought I didn't know what I was doing, but I guess I showed you." In reality, it was sheer luck that one tree survived, much less both trees.

Before long, I had two trees in the front yard each competing for space and each getting in the others way. Now, I had one too many trees and I had to decide which one should be cut down. It seemed a shame, after fighting for life, being given minimal care and managing to survive the wind, the hail, the lawn mower, not to mention the neighborhood dogs, one tree had to go.

So the decision was made to cut the smaller of the two trees. I borrowed a chain saw and in just a couple of minutes the tree was on the ground. I have to admit, it was much larger than I thought it was when it was standing straight up in the ground. It was at least 35 - 40 feet tall, 8 - 10 inches wide, with roots that snaked into the ground to stabilize it, some as much as 3 - 4 inches wide. All in all it was a negative experience. After all, I had planted the tree, watched it grow and survive, saw it every day of my life and then in a flash, I had destroyed it. What had

taken "mother nature" six years to grow, I had cut to the ground in just minutes.

A person spends years, in fact, his/her entire lifetime earning a good reputation. Then someone with little care or concern for that reputation says something, makes an accusation, points a finger, makes even the smallest innuendo, and a person's reputation is destroyed as surely and as quickly as my tree was felled to the ground.

The Bible warns against being a tattler, busybody, gossip, and talebearer. When we do this it puts us in an interesting category in Proverbs 20:3 where it says, "every fool will be meddling." It puts us in an even more interesting category in I Peter 4:15 where it warns against being a "murderer, thief, evil doer, or a busybody in other men's matters."

It's relatively easy to replant a tree and in just a few years everything seems as good as new. It's sometimes impossible to live down damage done by a person's tongue. The Message puts it this way in James 3: 6, "It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell."

May God help us to say what needs to be said, when it needs to be said. But perhaps even more importantly, may God help us to keep quiet when keeping quiet is exactly what we should do in keeping with the gentle spirit of Christ.

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