

COMMENTARY

'Bless your heart' is all about the tone



Kelly Kazek
kkazek@al.com

"Bless you heart" has a reputation, y'all. Sure, it sounds sweet. When two of the three words are "bless" and "heart," how could it not?

So how did it turn into a fast-talking, back-stabbing, hot-pants-wearing southern phrase meant to knock someone back on her heels?

It's complicated.

It's like this — southerners are different from other people. We are different as a region. Why? There are other places in the U.S. where people "talk funny" and like big hair — go watch an old episode of Jersey Shore or one of those mob-wife-type shows if you don't believe me. Other regions have "rednecks." And "hillbillies." And all kinds of other stereotypes. So how did the south become a land unto itself?

I think it has to do with the way we think. The way we think has to do with the way we live. The way we live is defined by a slow pace. Waving at neighbors. Frying ... well, everything. Sitting on porches. Telling tales. Caring for others.

That sense of community is why we have the phrase "bless your heart," which meant, at first, "bless your heart." As in, "I feel for ya."

But, like most things, it evolved. In the era of AquaNet and pedal pushers, it morphed into a phrase anyone could add at the end of a sentence to indicate there might be a hidden meaning behind the words. A mean meaning. Example, "You must have been out in the humidity, bless your heart," which is a passive-catty way of saying, "Your bouffant flopped and you're looking a bit like a soggy sheepdog."

And that caught on. The double-edged use of the phrase became a way to give a little jab to others without acting ugly ... because southerners never act ugly. Then it became an inside joke.

That's another thing about southerners: We're quick to laugh at ourselves. Life here isn't so serious.

Most everyone I know, including me, uses the phrase both ways and, if we're to be honest, we more commonly use it in a sincere manner. Still, the passive-aggressive use has become iconically southern, and we've embraced it as something outsiders consider one of our many quirks.

I have been known to write in my columns that "bless your heart" is a phrase used to dress up an insult. I've even said jokingly that it's never sincere. But, of course, it is. Sometimes. Mostly, it's a little joke that only we get.

Really, the intended meaning of "bless your heart" has more to do with the tone than the words. It takes skill to use it correctly.

Here are some examples of ways to use bless your heart:

Beginner's Level, Sincere: "I just heard your dog went in for a colonoscopy, bless its little heart. Could I bring over a squash casserole?"

Beginner's Level, Sarcastic: "It's like she doesn't even own a mirror, bless her heart."

Advanced Level, Sincere: "I heard Merle is still recovering from surgery (whisper) down there, bless his heart."

Advanced Level, Sarcastic: "You really need to get your money back from that hair stylist, bless your heart."

Expert Level (do not try this without years of practice or it will backfire):

First, some background. I had a friend in high school who was very sweet with a very soft, sweet voice. One day, someone in our group of friends said something particularly moronic and she responded with, "Bless your heart, you're so stupid." I can still hear the words in her soothing-but-pitying drawl. She was not being sarcastic; she was not being mean. The doltish friend ended up just laughing, and all was well.

Such is the power of "bless your heart."