

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: Ten Commandments

Sermon: #9 Thou Shall Not Bear False Witness

Exodus 20:16

“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.”

Genesis 18:10-15

Then the LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son." Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

Proverbs 14:5-25

An honest witness does not deceive, but a false witness pours out lies. A truthful witness saves lives, but a false witness is deceitful.

Sermon

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1qw1fvyH9A>

Just two weeks left in our summer worship series on the Ten Commandments. We have considered the commands of God, delivered by Moses to the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness, and how they still provide for us foundational tenants of the faith, which seek to provide clear direction regarding right relationship between each of us and God, and each of us with one another.

But first, a confession: Hi, I'm Pastor Mike, and I'm a liar. There may have been times that I've exaggerated. There may have been times I've not told the whole truth. There may have been times I didn't want the truth to ruin a good story. Never in a sermon, though. These stories are always true. Mostly. Kind of. Sort of. Why do we lie? Most of us have lied at sometime or another. We watched the kids throughout the service try to weasle themselves out of jams. And its not just kids - I've seen youths, young adults and even the elderly fabricate fiction out of nowhere. I remember a older adult who promised the inheritance to a child of there's who faithfully cared for them in their old age. At the time of the reading of the will, the bulk of the estate went to everyone else but the care-giver. You can do what you want with your estate, but don't lie about it.

For us, this morning, I want us to try to faithfully comprehend how these ancient rules are still applicable, and to acknowledge that the community to whom these commands were first spoken was quite different than our community and world today. Understanding the text as it was first comprehended allows us to identify God's intent in such commands, and thus makes it possible to glean more faithfully how these rules speak truth into faithfulness for us as disciples today.

Today's Ninth Command is another good example of how we may have respoken a command without fully

understanding the contextual intent of the command as first offered. The Ninth Commandment is (generally speaking) summarized as being a prohibition against lying. When asked to repeat the Ninth Commandment, the modern day version most often spoken is, “You shall not lie.”

This interpretation is not wholly wrong, but it certainly isn’t historically correct. The text in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 is, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” Another translation says “You shall not answer against your neighbor a false testimony.”

You can hear in this more literal translation the words of the court system. The verb “answer” indicates that you are speaking as if responding to a question or request. The noun “testimony” (or the more often used, “witness”) indicates that you are speaking in a judiciary process. It is widely thought that the original context of this Ninth Commandment is the public witness of one person against another, as in a public court.

Again focusing on the context of the time, we did not see large court houses in the wilderness in which they walked. Even after they settled in the Promised land, the early ancient near east community was a largely agrarian society. Such public legal processes took place at the most visible location in the community – at the city gates. This is the same location the Romans would later use for crucifixions, because, as the most visible location, it was the best place to give warning to all (locals and travelers) about who was in charge of the town. We see examples of such judicial process taking place throughout the Old Testament.

The court system – the judicial process – was an emphasis for the Ninth Commandment, because such a community-focused system was the last standing hope for community upkeep. If one can’t get justice in the court system, then truth and justice are not available anywhere. In fact, the prohibition against telling false testimony was seen as such a significant detriment to community, that, like the prohibition against killing, adultery, and the stealing of people, were you to break the Ninth Commandment and speak falsely about another in a court process, you were likely to receive the death penalty yourself. Perjury (as we call it today) was considered a most serious crime.

In looking at the commandment as it was first offered to the Israelites, we can identify then two primary focuses, stemming from this origin regarding honest testimony in court. First and foremost was an emphasis on protecting the well-being of your neighbors. Especially in a court room, “the well-being of others is affected by what one says about them.”

Your mother may have taught you that sticks and stones can break your bones, but words will never hurt you. But words do hurt. And they can get you jail time, community service, or worse when spoken in a court of law. The reality is that in a court of law, speaking information about another with no factual foundation can result in the loss of property, the loss of rights, the loss of freedom, and in some cases, the loss of life.

The second primary focus of the commandment was to protect the institutions that were set-up to protect the community. If such public institutions, such as the court system, can’t be trusted, then all public institutions begin to lose trust, and the result is chaos. Evidence given in court systems must be honest and reliable. Anything spoken about another in judicial processes must be uncontaminated by interest. Many years ago, Walter Brugergerman said it like this: “If power and interest can intrude upon truth – by way of influence, manipulation, or bribe – then truth has no chance. It is reduced to power, and the powerless are then easily and predictably exploited.”

If you haven’t already made the connection for yourself, let us then step through the time-machine to bring ourselves back to our modern day situation to identify how this Ninth Commandment still lays the foundation for God’s intent regarding right relationship with our Creator and right relationship with one another in community.

We should first make the easy connection to the public institutions that are set-up to ensure the protection of our communities. If any one of our public institutions is identified as a place where speaking the truth about other people is lacking in part or in whole, then all public institutions are seen as places where trust is lacking. This is perhaps one of the greatest issues of our current society. From the top governmental sectors, like the Senate and House, the presidency, and the Supreme Court ... to national and state level agencies, such as the IRS, FBI, and ICE, Governor's offices and State Courts ... to the local level public agencies, such as police departments, educational facilities, City Councils, and general and district courts ... we see mistrust across the board. And we see mistrust, because the absolute truth is largely missing.

In each of these levels of public agency, we find that people speak falsely on a regular basis. In each of these levels, we find that people provide half-truths all the time. In each of these community-designed agencies, organizations that were set-up to protect the people, we find testimony that speaks falsely of others on a regular and on-going basis. Anytime you have half-truths, or truths corrupted with a spin, anytime a full truth is altered in anyway so as to deceive another, what you have is false witnessing. What you have is in direct contradiction to the Ninth Commandment. Much rumor, much undoing begins with partial truths." And in each and every level of our political and social realm, we find the truth altered – we find partial truths rampant. Snopes and others fact-checking agencies seek to point out these false truths; they seek to draw our attention to these lies, as such statements would be most accurately defined. But truth is so hard to find in our society, that we don't even believe the fact-checkers.

Fake News! Fake News! I understand bias. I understand spin. And no body gets it right every single time. But I'd rather trust CNN over somebody who has a reputation for lying. Give me Fox over what some blogger says.

Let's look at a couple of examples we see every day in the news:

Our police officers are now being expected to wear body cameras because all too often, the testimony of our police and the perpetrators are altered to protect one's self instead of being honest and truthful. The lack of truthfulness has set up an environment where police and entire communities lack trust in one another.

Many politicians alter the truth on a daily basis, often altering truths based on who is providing them support. Political power is now firmly in the hands of the money power in a symbolic relationship that feeds inequity and justice. Wealth is derived from power, and power in America is exercised almost exclusively by the wealthy. How should the majority of Americans, who are not part of the wealthy or powerful, ever find trust again in the political agencies that are supposed to be protecting and providing a safe and well-run community? The only possible way to bridge such a divide would be for an individual to refuse support from wealthy and powerful individuals and agencies. And while we have seen some individuals try this tactic, it doesn't seem to prohibit them from altering the truth to meet their personal or platform goals. And we think the game is rigged. Even Bernie couldn't beat Hillary.

Even Sarah lied to God. Sarah laughed when she overheard the cosmic plan of her bearing children. When God asked, she doubled down. I didn't laugh. And God didn't give her an out, he just told the truth: Yes you did.

Don't you wish that God would just come down and tell it like it is? The God fact checker on the news? In our courts, in our relationships, in our parenting? Who left these socks on the floors? Which one of my kids would do that? And it was Daddy. Truth be told, I want my kids to live forever with us, they make such great scapegoats. Who left the door open? Ask the kids. Who made a mess in the living room? Ask the kids. Who left the toilet seat up? Ask the kids. Even after they've been gone for 10 years - ask the kids.

So this is what I know to do: The only way to turn around such hypocrisy and unfaithfulness in the very places the Ninth Commandment necessitates is for each of us to lift up and maintain truthfulness in our own lives. And in reality, most of our lives and our interactions with community takes place outside of the courtroom. We must

not only set examples of such honest and faithful speech, but we must demand it of those who seek to represent us. As with other commands, reclaiming such honesty is going to be an uphill climb.

So we go back to the purpose and intent of the command as offered by God to the Israelites to claim faithful adherence today. Our truth-telling is not just about our necessity to be honest or our public institutions to demand honesty – it's about our right and faithful participation in community: a community that is taught to care for one another, to lift up one another in love, to ensure that each person is provided for their well-being. God's character is reproduced in you as God seeks to perfect you in love. No matter how hard it may be to speak the truth regarding another, we have the benefit of not going it alone. God has graced us with the presence of Christ and the everlasting power of the Spirit. So may we be ever faithful to the Ninth Commandment, that in the name of the Father, we may speak the truth; in the name of the Son, we may know the truth; and in the name of the Holy Spirit, may we ever claim the truth will set us free from the sin and death of this world. And the people of God said, AMEN.