



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -
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Loving the Truth and One Another—and Both in God

Proverbs 6:12-19, Ephesians 4 selected verses

There are six things that make God really mad, no, make that seven things that make God really really, really mad. And here they are . . . Gets your attention doesn't it? This rhetorical device—I call it “upping the ante”: six no seven; mad, no really, really, really mad—is a favorite one with Biblical writers. And in the passage I'm about to read, it's used to emphasize a favorite theme for Biblical writers: the high value—the well-nigh absolute value—of honesty and truth-telling in our speech. [Proverbs chapter 6: 12-19]

Our Second reading also addresses honesty and truth-telling in speech. In it, Paul drops the beautiful phrase, “speak the truth in love.” But what does this mean? Temper our words with compassion and care? Refrain from “truth-dumping”? That is, refrain from saying cruel things to someone under the guise of, “Well, I'm just telling you the truth.” That's the way we tend to hear it—and that's not all bad. But if you read the passage closely you'll see that Paul, like the Old Testament writers, is contrasting—in the starkest possible terms—straight and crooked speech, honesty and dishonesty, truth-telling and lying.

He's saying that now—now that we know Christ, now that we live in Christ, Christ who is truth—we must put aside all dishonesty and lying. More than that, dishonesty and lying should make us angry—we cannot let that anger define us, we cannot let it tempt us into hatred and lying ourselves, we must still speak the truth in love—but nonetheless, lying and dishonesty should make us angry.

Listen now for God's Word, reading from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians chapter four beginning with verse 14:

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro, and blown about by every wind of teaching, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ . . .

Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must not live as you used to live, as others still live: in the vanity of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have cast off all feeling for others and have abandoned themselves to self-indulgence . . . That is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus.

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Get angry; but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, but give no quarter to the devil.

The Word of the Lord.

It's a standard discussion-starter for an ethics class:

Suppose you're living in Nazi Germany, and you're hiding a Jewish family in your attic. One day the Gestapo come pounding on your door, demanding to know where the family is, asking you if you've seen them. What do you do? What do you say? Is lying ever morally acceptable? That's the question. Is it OK to lie to save innocent human life when there seems to be no other way? Having taught such a class for a number of years, I can tell you, the majority of students said “Of course, it is; of course, I would lie.” For them, it wasn't even a question. Some, a little more uncertain, would suggest half-truths and evasive answers—“I haven't seen them on the street in quite some time,” which is true—if you take “on the street” in the most literal sense (you have, after all, seen them in your attic quite recently). But every once in a while, I had

a student defend what's called the absolutist position: "You have to tell the truth. It's always wrong to lie—no matter what."

As for me . . . well, to tell the truth, I got tired of the whole discussion. And worried about our even having it. Not because it didn't engage the students; it did; that's why it was so tempting to use it. No, I got tired of it, because it engaged them in the wrong way.

It engaged them in the wrong way because it took questions of honesty and dishonesty, lying and truth-telling, and cast them into a remote, historical setting far removed from their everyday lives. Yet such questions were very much a part of their everyday lives; anyone who has spent any time on college campuses knows that cheating is endemic on many of them. So I worried that I was teaching them to be good classroom debaters, but not more truthful human beings. As Arjay Miller, former dean of the Stanford Business School put it, during one of the insider trading scandals, "There are a lot of people in jail right now who got A's in their ethics classes."

Of course, not all questions of honesty and truth-telling are so dramatic.

"Isn't she the most beautiful baby you've ever seen in your life?" The right answer by the way is, "Yes, yes she is." It's one of those "little white lies," you know, a trivial, harmless, maybe even helpful, lie—a way of saying, "I'm very happy for you"—really not a lie at all but only a verbal gesture meant to grease the wheels of social interaction.

But the problem arises when one person's "little white lie" is another's moral offense. "You know, it just would have been so awkward to tell the truth—I mean, yes, the pension fund does belong to the employees—technically—but we do manage it, and this was all for their benefit, and it would have upset so many people if we said anything about it . . ."

They're complex—all these questions about lying and telling the truth—complex, and yet they affect all of us in all kinds of ways in our everyday lives, from the apparently trivial to the momentous and life-changing.

And so, if you want to see what the Bible says about all this, well, the first thing you might notice, especially if you use your index or concordance, is the contrast between all this complexity and the Bible's explicit pronouncements on this subject, which have a stark, at times even thundering, simplicity: *Thou shalt not bear false witness; Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord; Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.* All of which sounds like the absolutist position.

And you can hear the thunder in today's reading from Proverbs: The things that make God really really really mad? A scoundrel who goes about with crooked speech, a lying tongue, a heart that devises wicked plans, a lying witness who testifies falsely. And these are inextricably connected with all other evils: a corrupted mind, a wicked heart, discord in the family, the shedding of innocent blood.

And it's in the New Testament, too. You can hear the stark simplicity of Jesus' well-known admonition from the Sermon on the Mount: "*Let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no'*"—no exceptions for white lies here.

Even Paul's injunction to "speak the truth in love," which at first might seem a little more nuanced—but listen again as Paul describes those who live apart from the truth: "They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have cast off all feeling for others and have abandoned themselves to self-indulgence . . ."

It sounds like the absolutist position. But if you take a closer look, you'll see that the problem recurs in the Bible itself. Look at the narrative passages—the stories—and you'll see the Bible is every bit as complex. Do you remember Rahab? She's the woman in Jericho who hides the Hebrew spies (this is right before Joshua and company bring down the walls). When the Jericho police come knocking on her door, looking for the spies, guess what Rahab does? She hides them under wheat sheaves on her roof (the equivalent of her attic), and tells the Jericho police, "They want thataway!"

That's a lie: and yet Rahab is lauded in the Bible; Matthew includes her in the lineage of Jesus; the letter to the Hebrews includes her in the honor role of faith.

And earlier, back when they were enslaved in Egypt, when Pharaoh orders the Hebrew midwives to kill all their newborn boys, the midwives disobey his command and then lie about it: "You know those Hebrew women," they tell Pharaoh, "they're so darn tough, they have their babies without us." And then, in the next verse, we're told: "God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong." And I'm not even going to get into Abraham's lies to "protect" Sarah; Jacob's lies to his father, Isaac; Joseph's lies to his brothers to read their hearts; or whether Paul lied to the Sanhedrin in order to divide the court.

And if you go beyond the Bible to later Christian writers, it's no different. Augustine, for example, sounds like an absolutist: "All lying is wrong," he says, "we must never lie." But then (he continues), "and yet some lies are a lot more wrong than others." And thereupon he proceeds to group, rank, and analyze them from the worst to the least bad, and by the time you get to the least bad they don't seem bad at all. I know it all sounds confusing and even contradictory, but really, it's not.

Be as innocent as doves and as cunning as serpents—so Jesus says to his disciples as he sends them out into the to the world. And that's the advice we need to remember here:

In terms of the fundamental orientation of our lives, our deepest commitments, what we really live for—not what we say we live for, but what we really live for in how we act—we are to be as innocent as doves. Live for something greater than self, live for the truth, live for God, love that greater thing, love the truth, and love God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Love the truth—and remember that, with every lie, no matter how seemingly small, no matter how well intentioned we are in telling it, we risk separating ourselves from the truth, at least to some degree, however slight. Of course, the habitual liar always overlooks that risk: he thinks he's keeping the truth to himself and keeping others from it. But the truth is just the reverse: the truth is that, over time, the habitual liar loses his own hold on the truth—loses even his ability to remember it and to recognize it. Hence Mark Twain's quip: "If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything."

And yet—let's be honest here—our world has its share of habitual liars, often in positions of power, positions they got by lying. Navigating our way through such a world, this fallen world, requires that we be as cunning as serpents. I confess: it was a teacher's trick. I got so tired of so many of the students saying with so much confidence what they would do in that situation—the Gestapo knocking at the door, I mean—that I decided to learn what it was like—really like—to shelter Jews in Europe during WWII; that's what led to my teacher's trick.

It wasn't hard: books, documentaries, movies about those who really did shelter Jews during World War II have been coming out for years now. Back then, I showed Pierre Sauvage's documentary (a Bill Moyers special on PBS) about Le Chambon, a little village in southern France, a close-knit religious community (almost all the residents were descendants of dissident French Protestants) which took in, hid, gave refuge to, and thereby saved the lives of, as many as 5,000 Jews.

As innocent as doves, and as cunning as serpents . . . it was a large and complex process to funnel so many in and out of their village in occupied France—do you think they might have told a few lies in the process? And yet not without difficulty. One of the common threads in all these stories is the initial and sometimes ongoing difficulty that so many of these good and honest people had in telling lies. They were bad at it—they would hesitate, look away, look down, stammer, blush, and generally give themselves away. It says something about their character—the fundamental orientation of their lives, their deepest commitments, what they really lived for, their love of something greater than self, their love for the truth and for God—that they had to practice lying, and they were still bad at it! In some homes, it was a rule that certain family members who couldn't lie convincingly would never answer the door for fear it might be the secret police.

So my trick was to allow the discussion to go on, growing ever louder and more self-assured, and then—with no

small dramatic flourish—lower the lights, slide the cassette into the VCR (ask your parents), and play a portion of the documentary. When I raised the lights, the silence was deafening. All of us—myself included—saw the truth at that moment: I don't know what I would do in that situation: I hope and pray that I would have the goodness and the courage of those brave, beautiful people; and I hope I would never be complicit in such evil as so many were. But truth be told, I don't know. All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good people . . . get tired.

And we do get tired. It was true of Germany in the 20's 30's and 40's, and it is true of any society, any country, any people, any group, or individual: a disregard for the truth—and a degradation of the truth—goes hand in hand with moral corruption. It's not just a symptom of moral corruption—it's part of the corruption itself. And if you're living in close proximity to such a person, or in such a society, it has a demoralizing effect, in every sense of that word. You get tired.

You get tired of all the bluff and bluster, accusation and counter-accusation, posturing and counter-posturing, all the conspiracy theories and counter-conspiracy theories, all the noise and nonsense—all the lies. Every liar wants to sow the seeds of confusion, kick up a lot of dust, muddy the waters—precisely because our clear and steady fix on the truth would reveal his lies to be just that—lies. And it never ends. Day after day, up is down and down is up. What is said today stands in direct contradiction to what was said last month, last week, or even last night. And the liars keep right on lying with no sense of shame, really, with complete impunity. And to point that out, to insist on the truth—to express outrage—is itself somehow seen as tiresome, naive, shrill, and well, just bad form—everybody does it, everybody lies—and after all, who can say what the truth is? All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good people . . . get tired.

And so Pilate looked at him: "What is truth?" he asked. And then, without waiting for an answer, he handed truth over to be crucified.

And the worst of it is that liars never self-identify. In fact, just the opposite: they wrap themselves up in the mantle—the vocabulary—of truth, proclaiming themselves to be the sole purveyors of truth and everyone else—especially those who oppose them—to be the liars, the fakes, the crooked ones. And with all the dust being kicked up, it can be hard to sort it all out—and really, why bother? It's all a show, anyway. A pox on both your houses, both your parties. We grow distrustful, tired of the moral vocabulary itself, precisely because it is so often in the mouths of scoundrels so that you find yourself avoiding it altogether except in spitting sarcasm and mocking irony.

And so Pilate looked at him: "What is truth?" he asked. And then, without waiting for an answer, he handed truth over to be crucified. So what are we, in our little village in southern Ohio, to do? Follow Paul's advice, I think: First: Speak the truth in love. Put away falsehood. Speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.

But then, when it comes to those who would toss us to and fro by their craftiness in deceitful scheming, by their lying and dishonesty, when it comes to those who, because of their ignorance and hardness of heart, have cast off all feeling for others and have abandoned themselves to self-indulgence . . . those who would weaken our social bonds and sow discord among us by crooked speech, lying tongues, and hearts that devise wicked plans . . . well, here again, I think we need to follow Paul's advice: Get angry. Don't get tired, get angry.

Paul puts it in the imperative: get angry. Yes, yes we must not let the sun go down on your anger; in other words, we must not let our anger define our lives and who you are, that would be sin—our love of the truth must define us—but these days, for the love of truth, get angry. Give no quarter to the devil.

Jesus once asked his followers, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight in a day?". This time of year, we're blessed with even more. And a good thing too: we need all of them: Don't get tired, get angry. Speak the truth in love: get angry.

In the name of Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life. Amen.