

YOUR TALE IS SHOWING

Tenth in series, Ten Commandments Revisited The Ninth Commandment

Preached by Douglas Norris at the First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
April 28, 1985 James 3:2-12; Matthew 15:10-20

It is written in the Talmud that a king once sent two court jesters into the world. To one, he instructed, "Go out and bring back the best thing in the world." To the other, he instructed, "Go out and bring back the worst thing in the world." They each brought back the same item, a tongue! In our lesson today, James writes that the tongue is like a fire and, he says, look at how large a forest can be set afire by a tiny flame. He says we have learned how to tame wild animals, but who can tame the tongue? In our gospel lesson, Jesus notes that it is not what goes into a person but what comes out of the mouth that reveals what a person is like.

The Bible warns us of the tongue, and most definitely, we are commanded not to lie. The ninth commandment reads, "You shall not bear false witness." You shall not lie. Lying is disastrous to civilized living. Stiff penalties were imposed on persons who gave false testimony in a trial. Deuteronomy 10:18-19, "If a man has made a false accusation against his fellow Israelite, he is to receive the punishment the accused man would have received."

We are people of the covenant. God is our God, and we are God's people, called to live out God's lifestyle as a model for all humankind. Turn the ninth commandment around--"You shall not bear false witness"--and it becomes, "You are people of the truth." People of the covenant are committed to the pursuit of truth; the truth about themselves, about others, and about the world. This commandment is in sharp contrast, as are all of the commandments, to our culture today. The dominant theme of our culture is: In order to succeed, do and say what you have to. Lili Tomlin, acting as eight-year old Edith, states our modern philosophy well. Edith says, "Lies are untrue. But the truth can be made up, if you know how." (Edith is the one who also said, "I'm not bossy; my ideas are just better.") In contrast, people of the covenant do not tell lies, live lies, or believe lies.

First, do not tell lies about other people; but speak the truth. Can you imagine a community where no one gossips; where no one tells lies about other people; where half-truths, innuendos, nuances are absent; where no one is put down? That is the church or, should I say, the ideal church. We are called by God, loved and redeemed by God, changed by God, to be models to all the world of how people should live together. God's way is a community where truth is revered.

God's way is a community where gossip is banished. Proverbs 18:18: "Gossip is so tasty; how we love to swallow it!" In contrast, apply the age-old principles and ask, when you hear something about someone else and are tempted to spread the tidbit even further: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? The first question which would stifle most gossip is, "Is it true?" Another test to apply to a bit of news you have heard about someone and are tempted to pass on is: Would I be willing to repeat this item to the person talked about? That should stop most gossip. When there is doubt, go to the person and ask him/her if it is true. If it is true, they need your support and help. If it is not true, they will appreciate your concern for their reputation.

People of the covenant do not tell lies about other people; in fact, it is better not to talk about people, period. Who was it that said, "Great minds talk about ideas. Mediocre minds talk about things. Small minds talk about people.

When tempted, pray the prayer found in Psalm 141:3, "Lord, place a guard at my mouth, a sentry at the door of my lips." Put a guard at your mouth, for your tale is showing.

Secondly, do not live a lie: but live the truth. Live the truth about yourself; don't live a lie. God made you to be you. Be realistic about yourself. Face yourself in all honesty. The biblical authors use words like "repentance, confession." Be honest with yourself, about your failures, errors, shortcomings, and be honest about your strengths, talents and gifts. Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free." (John 8:32) The truth will set you free to be who God made you to be.

God created a unique person in you; there is no one else in the world like you. Don't deny yourself and pretend to be someone else. God redeemed you to be you, to bring you back to your created purpose. You are not your mother, or your father; you are you.

Live your own life. Walk your own journey, not someone else's. Anthony de Mello in The Song of the Bird, pages 32-33, tells of "The Explorer."

The explorer returned to his people,
 who were eager to know about the Amazon.
But how could he ever put into words
 the feelings that flooded his heart
When he saw exotic flowers
 and heard the night-sounds of the forest;
When he sensed the danger of wild beasts
 or paddled his canoe over treacherous rapids?

He said, "Go and find out for yourselves."
To guide them
 he drew a map of the river.
They pounced upon the map.
They framed it in their town hall.
They made copies of it for themselves.
And all who had a copy
 considered themselves experts on the river,
For did they not know its every turn and bend,
 how broad it was and how deep,
 where the rapids were and where the falls?

But they never saw the river for themselves. They never experienced the Amazon for themselves. They took the map and someone else's experience for their own. Walk your own journey. Enjoy your own experiences. Live up to your own expectations, not those imposed upon you. Be who God created you to be. Don't lie to yourself. Live the truth.

Thirdly, don't believe lies; but pursue the truth. The people of the covenant are not complacent, but are constantly pursuing the elusive truth; truth with its many sides, its varied perspectives. We are living in a time and in a place where the truth is not pursued or even welcomed. People are easily satisfied with lies and half-truths; in fact, they resent having to face the truth. Leaders who tell the truth are crucified. Messengers with the truth are punished. People do not like to hear the truth, either about themselves, or about their world. Isaiah's observation is still true: (28:15) "You are certain that disaster will spare you when it comes, because you depend on lies and deceit to keep you safe." People prefer to live in a Disneyland, a fantasy land. People want a government to tell them life is getting better and better. People want a nice religion that makes them feel comfortable.

I suppose it is partially due to laziness. To pursue the truth, to ask for corroboration, to doubt and question, requires energy. A man was on his hands and knees. "What are you looking for?" he was asked. "My key." Both of them searched until the question, "Where did you lose it?" "At home." "At home! Why are you searching here?" "Because the light is better here." Many prefer to do whatever is easier. Many prefer convenient explanations, rather than search and struggle for the truth.

Sometimes it is the expedient that wins out over truth. Anthony de Mello writes of "The Job" (The Song of the Bird, pages 84-85).

Enter first applicant.

"You understand that this is a simple test we are giving you before we offer you the job you have applied for?"

"Yes."

"Well, what is two plus two?"

"Four."

Enter second applicant.

"Are you ready for the test?"

"Yes."

"Well, what is two plus two?"

"Whatever the boss says it is."

The second applicant got the job.

We are people of the covenant. We are called to pursue the truth, not whatever is the easier, not whatever is the expedient, not content with what we are told or what we read in the media. God gave us minds. We are called to use them, to rise above the herd mentality, and find, or at least be in the pursuit of finding, the truth.

The ninth commandment challenges, "You shall not bear false witness." Your tale is showing. Do not lie about others. Do not lie to yourself. Do not believe lies. We are people of the covenant, committed to the pursuit of truth.

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THE NINTH COMMANDMENT

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