

February 12, 2017

TEXT: Matthew 5:33–37

TITLE: Words from the Mount – To Tell the Truth

How appropriate that on this President's Day weekend, we've heard a bible passage about telling the truth. We remember "Honest Abe" Lincoln and George Washington, who supposedly said "I cannot tell a lie" and then we hear Jesus say in his Sermon on the Mount, "Don't swear falsely or tell lies—in fact, just let your word be "Yes" or "No" and leave it at that." Why is something so simple so difficult to live out in our modern world?

As I mentioned last week, Jesus' teaching style is not to give simple answers to hard questions, but rather to set two phrases side by side and invite us to think faithfully about their relationship. Last week it was "You have heard it said that all who murder are liable to judgment, but I say to you, those who are angry and call others a fool are also liable to judgment." Can anger be as destructive as murder—and if so, can reconciliation literally be life-giving? Now this week Jesus says, "You have heard it said that you shouldn't lie under oath and swear falsely, but I say to you, don't swear at all; let your "Yes" be "Yes" and your "No" be "No." Swearing oaths, making promises, telling the truth—how do we begin to understand what Jesus is trying to teach us?

To start with, imagine yourself standing upright, feet firmly planted on the ground, with a circle inscribed around you. That is the "truth telling" zone. As you stand there, you are directly connected to simple truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Point #1: Living in this world, you will constantly be made to step outside of that circle. You go to the library and check out a book, but somehow it wasn't demagnetized properly. As you leave the library, the metal detector beeps and the nice security guard asks if you checked out the book in your hand. You say "Yes" and show the paper receipt. You said "Yes" standing in the truth zone, but as soon as you showed the receipt, you stepped outside the circle. Something beyond your word was deemed necessary to prove you were telling the truth: A checkout receipt from the librarian. Like when you show your ticket stub to prove you are in the right seat at the concert, or a photo ID to prove you are the person whose name is on the airline ticket.

Every day, truth is not determined by our words but by something added onto our words. My spoken "Yes" plus documentation—a receipt or credential—equals "truth." Sadly, once we step outside the circle, we move onto a slippery slope where truth becomes ever more elusive. Suddenly the documentation isn't enough. What if that receipt is a fake? What if your driver's license is forged—do you have two sets of ID? Are you willing to take a lie detector test? The area outside the circle of truth presupposes that all the world is dishonest—that your word is simply not enough. Sadly most of our time in this life is spent in a world that lies "outside the circle" of truth telling. That is not to say that everything in the

world is a “lie”; it is only to acknowledge that the basic rules of life in general are “let the buyer beware” and “trust, but verify.”¹

Another example of stepping outside the circle of truth happens when telling the simple truth may cause someone else harm or embarrassment. There’s a wonderful children’s book called Squids will be Squids, which teaches this important moral: *You should always tell the truth. But if your mom is out having the hair taken off her lip, you might want to forget a few of the details.*² People want us to tell the truth, but sometimes we don’t because to be brutally honest would be, well, brutal. So we tell “little white lies.” We fib. We omit a few important details. We step away from truth into a place that feels easier or less confrontational.

Stepping away from truth is particularly prevalent in today’s postmodern society. We are asked a question and we give a truthful answer. Someone challenges us, so (as in the first example) we step outside the circle and show them the data; we pull out charts and PowerPoints; we point to foot-notes and citations. Still they don’t believe. Or we give a truthful answer, but (as in the second case) someone challenges us by saying that we haven’t included all the relevant facts—that we’ve massaged the truth to make it fit our biases and that they would answer the question quite differently.

These examples of stepping out of the circle depend on the idea that there are multiple “truths” out there in the world—all equally valid. In the musical “Jesus Christ Superstar,” one song expands the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate, so that after Jesus says that he has come to testify to the truth, Pilate sings “*But what is truth? Is truth unchanging law? We both have truths. Aren’t mine the same as yours?*” Today we seem to be faced with plural “truths,” competing “truths,” the idea that two different things can both be called “truth.” Suddenly press conferences are held to pit one truth against another. Facebook feeds and social media conversations battle over which truth is more “true.”

Can these conflicting claims be resolved? Not really. Once we’re outside the circle, proof and reason aren’t totally effective anymore. That is why it is here that some people invoke the name of God. They swear “As God is my witness”, implying that God validates their words and if they’re wrong, God will punish them. Oaths like these were done a lot in the ancient world: people would swear upon the name of God at civic events or in legal matters. They were done a lot in the early Christian world: at least four times in his letters, the apostle Paul wrote “God is my witness.”³ And it happens a lot in modern times, putting your hand on a bible and swearing by the phrase “so help me God.”

Jesus questions why we do this. He insists it is a wrong approach to swear by God in heaven (since God’s not our personal attorney) or swear by the earth (since the earth isn’t worried about our oaths) or swear by our nation or by our own being. Jesus pushes that all to one side and tells us to start over—to just

say “Yes” when “yes” is right, and “No” when “no” is right. That will be enough and will suffice.

Once again, I believe Jesus is right. The world may require proof of purchase, photo IDs, and allow for alternative versions of truth to be considered equally valid. But remember, we are in the world without being of the world. The circle’s boundary may be crossed every time a librarian asks for our receipt or the TSA agent checks our passport; but the circle can be as wide and expansive as we wish it to be when we faithfully let our “yes” be “yes” and our “no” be “no.”

We each stand on a foundation of faith—faith in a God who is trustworthy, a Savior who is loving, and a Spirit who moves us from darkness into light, death into life. Because we prioritize that relationship, we choose to keep our word whenever possible. We shake hands and keep our promises. We try to be fair, gracious, and treat others as we would like to be treated. As we do that, we surround ourselves with people who value those same things. Ideally they’re a part of our family—whether blood relations or heart relations. Ideally they’re close to us where we work, where we relax and laugh, and where we worship and pray. I know that is often not the case. But the solution to that is not to step outside the circle—to mold our life according to the ways of the world, acquiescing to the manipulation and deceit of alternative truths, fearing the worst and trusting no one. No, the solution is to stand in the circle and by our persistent “yeses” and “noes”, we expand it so that we have a home in this world that reflects a bit of our heavenly home.

This past week, our renovations committee interviewed three candidates for general contracting firms. They were all good and I’m sure any would do a great job for us. One firm had good materials they shared with us. An executive with a second company spoke a lot about his experience with historic churches just like ours. The third firm wasn’t as polished. The lead speaker squinted a bit as he tried to decipher his notes. Their presentation transitions weren’t as smooth as they might have been. But in talking with them, in particular with the woman project manager and the male project superintendent—the people who would be on-site overseeing our \$6 million renovation project—our committee found a comfort level with them. There was a sense that they were trustworthy, that they’d care about the quality of work being done and in their dealings with us they would let their “yes” be “yes” and their “no” be “no.” Our committee still has more work to do; we’ll check references and ask follow-up questions to the three firms. But I remembered that third team as I pictured the circle of truth and faith upon we stand—and how God brings people into our lives that help us expand that circle in ways that this world will never fully understand.

We will never have justice in this world simply by avoiding what is bad. Justice comes when we internalize a commitment to act in ways that are mutual and trustworthy. Remember: You don’t need to swear by a higher authority to prove

you're right; instead you need to stand on a foundational authority and faithfully, simply, do what's right.

Amen

¹ Russian proverb quoted famously by Ronald Reagan regarding nuclear disarmament.

² Jon Scieszka, Squids Will be Squids.

³ E.g., Rom 1:9, 2 Cor 1:23, Phil 1:8, and Gal 1:20.