

July 1, 2018

TEXT: Exodus 20:16; Zechariah 8:16–17

TITLE: Thou Shalt, Thou Shalt Not – Truth Telling & False Witness

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

This month, Heather, Patrice and I are going to explore some of the Ten Commandments. Since there are five weeks in July, we'll only get to half of them—so if you have a favorite commandment you want us to talk about, let us know. Actually the phrase “favorite commandment” is a bit of an oxymoron. We rarely get excited about the commandments. They feel like rules your teacher taped up on the first day of elementary school—don't do this, don't do that. In the Jewish tradition, they actually call the Ten Commandments the “Ten Words,” which humanizes these rules. It presents them for what they are: words spoken by God, the God who brought us long ago out of slavery in Egypt, the God who loves us still, speaking words we should listen to and take to heart.

Here's a word of encouragement: Every one of you has already kept all Ten Commandments this very day. But then you woke up and got out of bed, and likely one or two of them has been broken already this morning. As we reflect on these commandments in the coming weeks, think about them as containing both a “Thou shalt” and a “Thou shalt not.” Most commandments name a negative boundary we are not to cross if we want to have a faithful relationship with others and with our God. And since we can't stay in bed all the time, by remembering what it is we are trying to protect, it becomes easier to keep the commandments and follow the words of God in our daily life.

So I'm beginning with Commandment #9—“Don't bear false witness against your neighbor.” Given the current political climate in America, this seemed like an important commandment to consider first. “Bearing false witness” can be narrowly defined as lying in court. In biblical times as well as modern times, people are called on to tell the truth so that wrongs can be righted and evildoers can be distinguished from those who are innocent. If you lie under oath, you subvert the entire system of justice—and someone will be unfairly harmed by your false witness.

There are three things to keep in mind when considering this commandment. First, we usually sin with words before we sin with deeds. And to be clear, both are equally damaging although we tend to diminish the harm caused by words alone. We hold onto the “playground morality” of “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” But that idea runs counter to what the bible teaches. The bible condemns sins of speech. Words that are misleading, libelous, defamatory, intentionally untrue or malicious are condemned by God, because they cause real damage when they are spoken and they often become the basis for further acts of harm against others.

Which leads to point #2: Lying and deceitful words are acts of violence. In the book of Job, when false comforters come to Job and further wound him with their comments, he

at one point cries out to them, *How long will you torment me and break me in pieces with words?* (Job 19:1) And in the book of I Kings, there's a story in chapter 21 about how a righteous man named Naboth had a vineyard right next to the palace of King Ahab, but Ahab wanted it to grow vegetables. For Ahab it was a request of convenience, but for Naboth, it meant surrendering something that had been in his family for generations—a vineyard that had taken years to mature and was the pride of his family. Ahab pouted over Naboth's refusal and then followed the counsel of his wife Jezebel, which involved paying men to falsely testify against Naboth in court. Ahab arranged for these false witnesses; Naboth was convicted of blasphemy and then stoned to death outside the city walls. In the end, the prophet Elijah exposed Ahab's sin and it didn't end up well for Ahab and Jezebel. The story reminds us how closely connected lies are with violence. They cause real harm and thus are to be stringently avoided.

#3: False witness and lying distorts justice, and no one wins when that happens. Almost every time this commandment is referenced in the bible, it is linked with the harm it does to the social fabric of life and the pain it inflicts on the most vulnerable in our midst. The prophet Zechariah in chapter 8 lays out this moral logic by saying: *Speak truth—render judgments that are true—do not devise evil against others nor love false oaths, for such things the Lord despises.* In chapter 7, a similar idea is expressed when he says: *Render true judgments—show kindness and mercy to one another—do not oppress the widow, orphan, alien (or immigrant), or the poor.* The connection between truth-telling and caring for those at risk is a straight and direct moral pathway.

Not so long ago, a young Stanford college student named Elizabeth Holmes veered off of that moral pathway. She founded a medical company that claimed it could do a host of tests from just a few drops of a patient's blood. No more doctors visits. No more long needles and vials of blood and delays in getting results from expensive labs. Just pop down to a local Walgreens, have your finger pricked and all you needed to know would be available cheaply and quickly. The problem was that this entire company, called Theranos, was built upon lies—unverifiable science and willful distortions. Investors lost millions; thousands received flawed or inaccurate blood test results. Because of these lies and false witness, in the course of a handful of years Theranos went from a multi-billion dollar industry to absolutely worthless, harming a wide range of society in its mendacious wake.

Closer to home, the recent shooting of Antwon Rose was made more tragic when at least two local TV stations reported there was film footage linking Rose to the neighborhood shooting to which the police were actively responding. That report was a lie—yet it kept being reported by the news channels and added to the racial tension of this sad case. WTAE admitted three days later they were wrong, but it took WPXI ten days to acknowledge their error. Yet I'm sure those false reports negatively affected how people in this community understood what happened on June 19 between Officer Rosfeld and a fleeing 17-year old Antwon Rose.

The ninth commandment says, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against your neighbor.” It is the second phrase that gives weight and justification to the first phrase. Bearing false witness against your neighbor—against the other—harms them, often in very real and violent ways. The fabric of society is distorted and damaged by lies, just as the fabric of every aspect of government—congressional, judicial and presidential—is ripped and tattered by lying, by words of malice, libel and defamation.

So if the commandment is “Thou shalt not bear false witness,” then what is its counterpart? What is the “Thou shalt” we should seek to do? Basically it is “Thou shalt always speak constructively and justly.” We are to speak of others so that their well-being is not just protected, but actually enhanced for the sake of the justice and health of all of God’s creation. Martin Luther, in one of his catechisms, understood this commandment as telling us to “put the best construction on all we may hear about our neighbors.” (Miller, Interpretation: ten Commandments, 386) This is not just a matter of spin. It is a matter of grace—of humility and humanity—of working hard not to distort the words of those with whom we disagree so as to diminish them and build ourselves up—but to preserve the reputation, dignity, and rights of all people in the community around us, regardless of their status or condition within our society.

I’ll close with a telling comment I recently read in the paper. There is a tendency in today’s world to distance ourselves from others—to say “let them take care of themselves,” whether that means Europeans or Canadians or Chinese, whether that means asylum seekers at our borders or working poor families here in our land. The language of nationalism, of America First and our needs first tastes sweet on the lips but is bitter and impossible to digest because of four things. We live in a world of global markets, global finance, instant communication, and the real possibility of instant nuclear annihilation. Because of these things, withdrawal is impossible. (NYT Review, The Moralist by Patricia O’Toole, June 24, 2018, p. 20)

At its heart, lying and bearing false witness are attempts to withdraw—to hide from the light of truth within the shadows of self-interest, prejudice, and fear. In Christ, we are called to be children of the light. God’s command speaks against lying, mostly because God calls for the well-being of all by using words that acknowledge our connectedness and protect Christ’s vision of a just and beloved community. Thou shalt not bear false witness against your neighbor. Thou shalt speak what is constructive and faithful. Or to paraphrase the apostle Paul in Philippians 4: *Beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is commendable, think [and speak] about these things, and the God of peace will be with you.* May it be so.

AMEN