

Exodus 20:16; 23:1-9

¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

23 You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with the wicked to act as a malicious witness. ²You shall not follow a majority in wrongdoing; when you bear witness in a lawsuit, you shall not side with the majority so as to pervert justice; ³nor shall you be partial to the poor in a lawsuit.

⁴When you come upon your enemy’s ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back.

⁵When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free.^[a]

⁶You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits. ⁷Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty. ⁸You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.

⁹You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

Ephesians 4:25-5:2 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Rules for the New Life

²⁵So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. ²⁹Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up,^[a] as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.^[b] **5** ¹Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ²and live in love, as Christ loved us^[c] and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

August 12, 2018

The Truth

Exodus 20:16; 23:1-9; Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Kerra Becker English

George Orwell has been attributed as saying, “In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth can be a revolutionary act.” Though there is no actual written documentation that he actually said it, on a website called “Quote Investigator,” it seems as though a lot of people thought that he did. Certainly, his well-known novel *1984* seems to make a case for that statement being something he might have said. A main premise of the novel is that lying has become pervasive, the norm in a culture that wants its bad news swept under the carpet. History is being re-written daily by those who wish it to be remembered in certain ways. And individuals who would question the deceit are quick to get into trouble or find themselves disappeared.

In our holy writings, truth telling is given significant importance, perhaps giving it the weightiness of being a revolutionary act, but also an act that should also be in our ordinary repertoire. It’s one of the 10 commandments. “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” It’s in the writings of Paul, “Let us all speak the truth to our neighbors.” And then both the legal code of Exodus and the moral code of Paul go on to explain that honest dealings should extend even further than that. Don’t spread a false report. Don’t join hands with the wicked to be a malicious witness. Don’t follow a majority when you know they are wrong. Don’t show partiality toward someone simply because they are poor, and elsewhere in Leviticus, the law says not to show favoritism to one accused because they are rich. Don’t take bribes. Don’t oppress people, especially aliens and strangers. And from the letter to the Ephesians, don’t steal.

Work honestly. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths. No bitterness, wrath, anger, or slander. And so it goes.

This concept of being truthful is rightfully associated with holiness, righteousness, and basically being a good person. For those of us who claim the Bible as an authority on our lives, the truth matters. But even as the Bible is clear in telling us to be truthful, the understanding is also there that being completely and utterly honest gets complicated. In the Presbyterian commentary on scripture that we also look to for guidance, our *Book of Confessions*, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Catechism, both teaching tools spell out the expectations and the difficulties of keeping this commandment, as they do with all the commandments. I'll read the Heidelberg explanation in full because it's the briefer of the two:

Heidelberg Catechism – what it says about what the commandment means

That I do not bear false witness against anyone, twist anyone's words, be a gossip or a slanderer, or condemn anyone lightly without a hearing. Rather I am required to avoid, under penalty of God's wrath, all lying and deceit as the works of the devil himself. In judicial and all other matters I am to love the truth, and to speak and confess it honestly. Indeed, insofar as I am able, I am to defend and promote my neighbor's good name.

Then, in the Westminster Larger Catechism the details get really specific particularly when it comes to naming the sins forbidden by this commandment. Among the sins it names are: calling evil good and good evil, rewarding the wicked according to the work of the righteous and the righteous according to the work of the wicked, undue silence in a just cause, speaking the truth unseasonably or maliciously to a wrong or perverting it to a wrong meaning, talebearing,

whispering, misconstruing intentions, boasting, thinking or speaking either too highly or too meanly of ourselves to others, denying the gifts and graces of God, raising false rumors, and that's just to name a few.

It seems to take a lot of words to explain the meaning behind the religious teaching on truthfulness. Maybe it takes a lot of words because it takes a lot of moral courage to live up to this admonition from scripture, particularly in its larger intent. As far as not bearing false witness goes, the Bible seems clear in that it's at the very least discouraged if not forbidden, but do we really understand why it is so important?

Lying hurts. We probably know that. Lying hurts. We've probably done it anyway. We may want to be true with our words, but we also don't want to hurt people or sometimes even make them feel uncomfortable. We cover up our own other unsavory behaviors with lies. We believe the lies told to us by others as gossip. We fail to understand others we deem as "different" because we believe lies taught that certain groups of people will always act this way or that.

On a personal level, we may have been taught by parents or another trusted older adult that we shouldn't lie. Sometimes it's those very same people that we catch in a lie when we are young and then don't know what exactly to do with that kind of information. Adults sometimes shape their conversations to be above kids' heads. The jokes in kids' movies are often intended to do just that, overreach the children and get a laugh out of the parents. While this seems tame and probably of no consequence, what is it teaching? What does it tell us about truthfulness if we teach it as "do as I say, not as I do?"

I think it begins that slippery slope toward the belief that lying is of no consequence. In our consumeristic culture, we can say anything, do anything to sell a product. I am floored by how many recent radio ads begin with how worthless it is to invest in your 401k. Now I'm no financial expert, but I dare say that this advice to ditch traditional savings mechanisms and fall for the "get rich quick" schemes has always been tragic for the majority of the participants who get drawn into it. The exaggerations of advertising are so pervasive that we don't even really notice them anymore as misrepresentations of the truth. And as the election draws closer in November, expect to see lies come out all over the place, as they always do when the races get heated and ugly in the Fall. But those aren't "my" lies, we say. They belong to someone else. But is that true? Are we ultimately responsible for how we invest, or purchase, or vote? Yes, I think we are. And believing other lies, allowing false witness to sway us is another component of practicing speaking the truth – with our neighbors.

I happen to believe that when we take the responsibility for telling the truth seriously, it is life giving. Living into more and more lies is destructive, harmful, ruining relationships and running haphazardly over our care for the environment. And telling the truth guides us into authenticity, our true lives, the lives that can help shape the world to be a better place. It's not easy. Not by a long shot. Telling the truth about who we are can feel like we are disappointing someone who had other expectations. Telling the truth about what we see wrong in the world can leave us feeling anxious and alone. Telling the truth becomes revolutionary as we begin to tell the rougher patches of American history through the lenses of those who have been deeply wounded by national transgressions like slavery, and the decimation of native populations, and our perpetually shallow biases around gender and sexuality. We can't continue to call evil good and good evil and make sense of our world as God would have us see it. We owe it to others to

be authentic in our words and with our actions, and we also owe it to our neighbors to value the authentic representations of who they really are.

This week the world lost a truth telling expert as Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon passed on from this life to rest in power, as she would say, with God. Dr. Cannon was the very first African American woman ordained in the Presbyterian Church USA, and as such she faced a long and painful road toward ordination – oftentimes feeling like she had to forsake family and shape her goals with utmost clarity in order to be the trailblazer that she was for other women. We were fortunate enough to have her for many years in our local community as a professor at Union Presbyterian Seminary right down the road in Richmond. The continuing education course I took with her a few years ago called “Writing our Resistance,” which began by listening to the truth-telling slave narratives of women was one of the most powerfully eye-opening courses I’ve done in my life. She knew the power of speaking the truth – and the detriment that comes from hiding behind it. Her words, her encouragements, the testimony to her power and influence have been pervasive as, this week, I heard a wide variety of folks mourn her death and praise her life.

She, along with other prophetically poetic voices, speaks to the power of telling the truth. So, if you aren’t quite so swayed by the law in scripture or the guidance of our confessions, perhaps it’s these revolutionaries who set us on the path to the rigors of living an authentic life. A fellow Union Seminary Alumni posted these words of Dr. Cannon’s this week in her memory. Laura quoted Dr. Cannon about telling the truth with your life, saying: “That kind of truth that stings like a serpent, that kind of truth that makes your teeth itch, that kind of truth that causes some people to lose their minds up in here – even when people call your truth a lie, tell it anyway, tell it anyway.”

I will close with this as a blessing. May your truth telling be both a revolutionary act and an everyday responsibility. Live, as best you can, your most authentic life. That's the life that God is calling you toward. That, I can promise. Amen.