

*My Mother Told Me to Tell the Truth, Mostly
The Ninth Commandment*

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson

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A little over a month ago, when Alberto Gonzalez was testifying before a Senate Committee, he used a phrase that took me back a number of years. It snuck in with his testimony about the firing of a number of U.S. Attorneys.

I turned 60 this year and have found that my memory is slipping a little; names don't come to me quite as rapidly as they used to. Still, I have a good memory, and I would hate to lose it to any degree. Gonzales; memory, for a young man, was quite remarkable, remarkably bad; at one point he even said that he could not "recollect remembering." This may be a new high in political speech. But then a phrase slipped from his lips: "mistakes were made," and I was taken back to the Nixon years and Watergate. After it became clear that the White House was deeply involved in the burglary of the Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate, Nixon's response was "mistakes were made." Not, as was later learned, "I am responsible for this, etc."

In his book, *Burning Down the House* (a great Talking Heads song, by the way. Think our choir should learn it?), Charles Baxter, novelist and critic, points to this as a watershed in American speech. The passive construct "mistakes were made" suggests a distance from responsibility, and even a distance between act and word. No indication of what the mistakes were, or who made them, just "mistakes were made." Baxter contrasts this with what Robert E. Lee said after the battle of Gettysburg when a great number of Confederate soldiers died: "This is all my fault. I asked more of my men than should have been asked of them."

Baxter goes on to say that since that mistakes were made statement, narrative, and particularly public narrative, has become divorced from the real world. Think of Bill Clinton in "I did not have sex..." or even more pathetically, "It depends on what the definition of 'is' is."

Responsibility for action has been placed elsewhere. Mistakes were made, but by whom and when? Well, we all make mistakes, but who made these mistakes? Gonzalez' testimony is like a maze, there has been no center. Public speech is a fog, and half the time it is impossible to know what is meant. Senior officials made decisions, but he cannot recall which senior officials. And the suggestion is almost as if this excuses the action. If no one is responsible, then apparently no harm has been done.

This is serious, I think, this distance between words and action. Lies, after all, are the separation of action and word. "I didn't do it." How many times have you said that in your life or heard it from someone else?

Thou shall not lie, or Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. The Commandment, the ninth of ten, is used in both constructions. They are not identical, lying and bearing false witness against year neighbor. The Hebrew suggests that the original was about bearing false witness against someone else; in other words, we cannot tell lies about another person, probably particularly in a court of law. To misrepresent someone else—this is one understanding of this Commandment. Understood this way, it would certainly indict most of our politicians who often make a career out of misrepresenting what others say.

Talk show hosts would be gone as well—oh heavenly day! What are Rush Limbaugh or Anne Coulter or Bill O'Reilly if not the personifications of the violation of this Commandment—bearing false witness against another person? But the Commandment has to do with lying as well.

We know it is wrong to lie, mostly. There are exceptions of course: was the Dutch family right to lie to the Nazis about Anne Franck's family hidden upstairs? Of course, they were right to lie.

Are white lies OK? Well, sometimes, of course. Is it OK to say "Sure, I am fine." When you are not but simply wish to keep that private? Or, "You look great." Of course.

Here is my favorite lie: remember the movie *Fried Green Tomatoes*? A delightful movie and rather brave at the time, depicting a lesbian relationship in the antebellum south, even though the movie version of Fannie Flagg's book somewhat hides the lesbian relationship. A man disappears, obviously murdered, and there is a trial. The man murdered was the abusive ex-husband of the woman.

At the trial the local minister takes the stand and testifies that the women are innocent; he was with them at the time of the alleged murder, he claims. This is not true; he has lied. How can this be?

When he takes the witness stand and is to be sworn in, the clerk of the court brings up the Bible and asks the minister to place his hand on it and swear—you know the words.

The minister has a book with him and says, "I brought my own," places his hand and swears. When the case is dismissed and they are all back at the Café, the minister is asked how he could lie, having sworn on the Bible? He says that well, he brought his own book, and never said it was the Bible. Instead, he said, "I had a copy of *Moby Dick* and swore on that." Yes, my feelings are mixed.

We should not lie because it breaks trust; and when trust is broken, relationships are harmed or destroyed, and the most important thing in our existence is threatened. To lie—that is, to intentionally deceive—creates a barrier between us. We live and find meaning in relationships we create. We were made for love, above all—love of a partner, of friends, love of those in community, love of children and family. Relationships: that is the heart of it.

I have said over and over again that Martin Buber is my favorite theologian, and I have never found him wanting. He says that all life is dialogue: we are in dialogue with our own selves, with others and with the world at large. We experience the "other" as an It or a Thou, as an object or a subject. When we relate to the world as Thou, as subject to subject, we might catch a glimpse of what Buber calls the Eternal thou: God, the holy, the sacred, spirit, whatever word you use. This is the essence and heart of religion, that we are connected, bound together in a web of the sacred.

It is unmediated, this I-Thou. What is in between is what gives the word its meaning, and what harms or breaks our dialogue, our relationships, is sin.

Lying breaks that in-between.

We have gone through a period of perhaps unprecedented lying by our political leaders. We are in a fiasco of war because of lies; we continue to be there because of lies. We have come to a point where we are stuck: we can't just leave and we can't just stay. The lies about weapons of mass destruction, about progress, the lies about our own casualties. The prohibition of pictures of returning coffins is a visual lie. There are lies about the nature of the conflict, about the "war on terrorism." Lies upon lies upon lies. This is not the first administration to do so, but it seems to have perfected the practice; it is an administration without any moral stature. Just as Nixon did much to demean government and the trust in government necessary for a healthy democracy, the current administration has caused deep harm to our republic. Whether it can recover is unknown.

There is much I disagree with in the current administration, but the deep pattern of lying, of misinformation, of withholding things is—well, what is the word. Awful? Well, yes, Criminal? Maybe. Immoral? To be sure. This is Baxter's point: If public narrative cannot be trusted, how can any narrative be trusted? How can we determine what is true and what is false if public officials do not care for the difference? If our language is so debased, as it has become, how can we be in conversation about the world?

If the public story (that is, the actions of our government) is not truthful, then how can any story be trusted? The recent scandal over the book by James Frey and the very recent decision against Purdue Pharma for lies about Oxycontin are signs of what Baxter calls a dysfunctional narrative created by the world of "mistakes were made."

But there is more. Baxter notes another dynamic which is that in this narrative, responsibility is placed elsewhere: the butler did it, my brother made me do it, the devil made me do it.

Remember Jane Smiley's book, *A Thousand Acres*, of some years ago? Smiley is an excellent writer, and inventive, I think, but I found the book bothersome because it suggested that everyone's problems come from somewhere else—in that book, childhood abuse. This is the exaggeration of what is called the Oprahization of our culture. My father or my mother did or did not; and on and on and on. Paul Wolfowitz is a victim, he says. A victim! Someone at the very highest levels of power is a victim! NO, he is not. The people of Darfur are victims, the citizens of Iraq are victims, but not Paul Wolfowitz. It is a "vast right wing conspiracy." Give me a break!

I have come to love watching *The Sopranos* and even there, these absolute thugs (Tony and Paulie and Phil Leonardo, Christopher, Carmelo) blame someone else—Paulie's mother, alcohol. Tony laid blame this week on his putrid family genes. They are victims, this absolutely criminal and awful group of people—the distance between action and narrative.

The dog ate my homework. Padding resumes. Peter betraying Jesus by lying that he does not know him.

Lies: they accumulate. After all, it is not the crime, it is the cover-up.

How often do you lie? Is this a problem for you? Little white lies? Big lies?

Lies: they destroy trust, and this is the heart, of course, of this Commandment. The destruction of trust, and how important trust is for us. Telling the truth, but what kind of truth matters here.

As I have found out all year long, the more I think about these Commandments, the more complicated they become. If we are to tell the truth, then what do we mean by that. The truth?

Is the truth what we mean by facts? That is certainly part of what we mean. And to lie about facts, those things we really can know with certainty, well, that must break trust. We all know these kinds of lies.

But what about another sort of truth? As we prepare to welcome Rev. Hannah Wells into our community this fall, I was reminded again of what it means to be a minister. We are often urged "to speak the truth in love." This guides our free pulpit, to speak the truth from this spot. Can you imagine if lies were told from here? What that would do?

Recently a colleague was dismissed for just that—using other people's sermons and claiming them as his own, he abused the sanctity of this free pulpit. We don't have to be right from here, but we do need to be honest. But to speak the truth? And to speak it in love? What might that mean? What truth are we getting at?

Is it the truth that justice should roll down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream? Or the truth that we should love our God, what is Sacred in our lives, with our hearts, souls, and minds and our neighbors as ourselves? Or is it the truth that we are all broken creatures seeking meaning and connection in life? Or the truth that we often just don't know what to do or who we are and where we should be headed? Or the truth that life is tragic, that we all die, that sometimes the innocent suffer and the bad are rewarded? The truth that people die too young and love dies?

Or the truth that love can flourish and justice can be sought, that peace can prevail and that there is great beauty? The truth that community can be places of healing and redemption, that there is great good in being together?

Which truth should be spoken with love from here? And what would it mean to lie.

Thou shalt not lie to yourself? Fool yourself, think you are something you are not, be someone who you are not? I had a long talk this year with a friend (not a member of this congregation) who is a lesbian and she

talked about how she had lived a lie for many years. She had denied who she was and what she desired. She said to herself, "No, I am not this," when she knew she was.

Living a lie? We stand here, in this pulpit and in these pews, on this patio and in these classrooms, on the side of love, but also on the side of truth. We say that to live a lie is wrong and tragic, that freedom means being able to be your true self, however that may be. We stand here for truth, for the self as it is and can become.

But we also claim that our life is found in community, with others, in the relationships we make and re-make and make, and lying breaks that.

On this Mother's Day, I remember that my Mom has always told the truth. It is not that she has never lied, but she has been truthful; she has not lived a lie. This Ninth Commandment centers on the relationships we build, for our relationships are based on truth, on being able to stand by our words, on being true to who we are, and on taking responsibility for our actions.

Like George Washington, we should not tell a lie, even if we can cut down the cherry tree.

Amen