

“The Truth and Nothing But the Truth” (Exodus 20:7, Acts 4:32-5:11) July 11, 2010
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Some time ago I was asked to preach a sermon about honesty and why it’s important to tell the truth. Today’s sermon is in response to that request. It may seem a “no-brainer” to tell the truth; yet, lying and dishonesty seem to be taken for granted in society today.

Brittany, our older daughter, met her boyfriend on E-harmony. When a person applies to be on E-harmony, he or she writes an essay about themselves, and Brittany’s boyfriend, said that the one phrase from Brittany’s essay that caught his attention was when she wrote: “I try not to lie.” Seems strange that that phrase is even necessary; but it is. You may remember that Brittany is an attorney, and she told me one time that it’s amazing to her how often attorneys in court out-and-out lie when making their case. They even know that the opposing side knows they’re lying. I asked her if attorneys in her firm lie. And she told me, “No, they are mostly good Catholics, and one is married to a UCC minister.”

Though I am no longer naive about lying being rampant; it still surprises me that it has become almost acceptable. Way back when I grew up, we were taught that lying was bad, even a sin. Now the emphasis is on whether one can get away with it.

It may surprise you that the verse in Exodus about “not taking the name of God in vain” is more about lying than about using four letter words. The spoken word held power in biblical time, and God’s name attached to the spoken word carried a powerful endorsement of the truth; therefore, “don’t misuse God’s name” by attaching it to a falsehood.

The later commandment “not to bear false witness against one’s neighbor” was critical in ancient Hebrew culture because legal judgments were made by the city fathers gathering at an appointed place and the people bringing their grievances to them for judgments. They understand the importance of the commandment: “You don’t lie about your neighbor to those passing judgment.” Truth telling was at the basic fabric of society; it meant the system could be trusted to have integrity.

This emphasis is carried into the reading from Acts where Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead because they lied. Their sin was not that they sold or didn’t sell their property, though there was clearly some pressure for all Christians to combine their wealth for the sake of the community. Their sin was that they lied about keeping some of the money for themselves.

The reason truth telling is critical is because if it is the standard, then we can assume that we can trust the reality in which we live and work to be the way it appears. But if trust is betrayed and we cannot trust what we perceive, society begins to live in a constant state of anxiety.

Most children test this standard sometime during their childhood. I remember catching my own kids on occasion with distorting the truth if not down right lying. A funny instance happened when Allison was about 10 years old. I caught her in a lie, and to impress upon her the importance truth telling held, I said something like: "If I can't trust you to tell me the truth, then life isn't worth anything."

Around that same time, Jean Manwarren came to me with a similar dilemma with her son, Michael. I told her what I'd said to Allison, and she repeated it to Michael. Later the two kids discovered that both their parents had said the very same thing. They decided it must be a standard parent answer to kids caught lying.

I believe that much of the anxiety in society today is because we can't trust those who we previously thought we could depend on. We can't trust the banks; we can't trust the CEO's of corporations; we can't trust stock traders; we can't always trust those we do business with on a daily basis; we can't always trust even our government; numbers can be distorted to say whatever wants to be said; politicians deny, deny, deny until proof of their lying hits the papers.

People look out for themselves and if lying is required to do so, it's deemed necessary. But we pay a very high price for this dishonesty inherent in our society. We make decisions based on lies that have far reaching consequences. We invest our finances based on trust only to see them disappear. People may find those they love the most in life are not truthful to them or faithful to the covenant made between them. I remember the first week that Tom and I began dating, I told him that I didn't want to keep anything from him and proceeded to tell him mistakes I'd made in the past because I didn't want to invest myself in a relationship in which keeping secrets was required. I wanted him to trust me and love me for the real me, and if he couldn't, then I wanted to know sooner than later.

We have ample opportunities to be dishonest. The test of an honest person is whether you tell the truth or do the honest action even when you don't think anyone will ever know. We must model honesty consistently for our children or else we should not be surprised when they see us lie and then do the same.

It is critically important that we honor the commandments that admonish us to tell the truth and not to bear false witness. The health of society depends on people being honest to each other. Because our relationships are not so intimate in today's world of e-mails and doing business with people we don't know, have never seen, and maybe don't even know their names, we may not feel accountable in the same way more localized societies of people living together and seeing each other face to face may feel. But honesty is still critical to our relationships in society.

My family is dealing with the consequence of this lack of integrity in insurance sales. My mom and dad were sold an annuity into which they put their life's savings of about \$140,000. The annuity pays out about \$12,000 once a year in the month of August.

This is not nearly what is required for my dad to live in his assisted care facility. Even with social security, he lacks about \$24,000 a year to meet his expenses.

Though they paid substantially into this annuity, my dad can only receive this once yearly payment of \$12,000 until 2019. Now, my mom has died, and my dad is 89 (not likely to live 9 more years), and we're going to have to come up with a chunk of change to keep him in his assisted living. When the insurance was called about the lack of honesty in selling this kind of annuity to elderly people, we were told "well, we don't sell those anymore". The fact is, it's illegal to sell them anymore. One wonders where the integrity and honesty was when this transaction took place.

We need to restore a depth of truth telling, honesty, and integrity into every aspect of our lives. Telling the truth brings freedom. When people betray others with falsehoods or deceit, we then must make laws to protect the innocent. We become less free when ones word can't stand on its on; honesty brings a greater level of freedom.

Besides freedom, truth also allows for grace. Church must be a community where truth is a given, where we can be honest about ourselves. If we cannot be honest about who we are, if we can't admit that we all are "standing in the need of prayer" then we may never truly know the grace of God's love.

We need to be able to trust again; to trust our families, friends, our government, our politicians, our businesses because things fall apart when society makes the choice not to tell the truth and nothing but the truth.