

The Value of Truth
A Sermon on Matthew 5: 33-37 by Rich Holmes
Delivered on February 16, 2020

As we come right off of Valentine's Day, I think it is fitting that I begin with the words of an old song you've probably heard at some point. I swear by the moon and the stars in the sky, I'll be there. I swear by the shadow that's by your side, I'll be there. For better or worse, 'til death do us part, I'll love you with everything in my heart, I swear. Beautiful words, and words that remind us that whenever we swear on something, we sound a lot more sincere than when we simply say we'll do something or we mean something. I swear on my mother's good name. I swear on the lives of my children, I swear on the bible. These words may make what we say more credible, but they run up against these words from Jesus today. "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'. Anything more than this come from the evil one. I like the way another translation says it. "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No', 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one." I guess it was because of this passage from the bible that when I was growing up if I said "I swear" I got that look from my mother. You know that look. And if I said "I swear to God" I don't want to tell you what happened to me then. But in this passage when Jesus talks about swearing I think Jesus' point is not so much about swearing as it is being the kind of person who doesn't have to swear in order to be believed. In other words be an honest

person, a trustworthy person. Honest and trustworthy people don't have to swear by anything. People know that when an honest and trustworthy person says something they mean it.

Early in his career a young preacher was talking about the importance of honesty to his congregation. He was telling them that honesty is a virtue and lying is a sin. Afterward a woman from the congregation came up to him and wanted to be sure she grasped his message as you know, people sometimes do after church. So now Reverend, you're saying we should always tell people the truth. Yes ma'am. We should never lie and always let people know exactly where we stand. Yes ma'am, that's right. That was the worst sermon I've ever heard.

That is a joke, of course, but the joke shows us a problem. Everyone believes it is wrong to lie but that telling the truth can sometimes be hurtful. We value telling the truth, we value having people around us who are trustworthy and honest. But do you tell someone the truth about how their unflattering dress really looks when they ask your opinion, or do you say it looks beautiful? Does a soldier returning from battle tell a grieving widow the truth about how much her husband suffered or does he lie and say he died instantly? If you are hiding the Anne Frank family in your attic, and the SS knocks on the door looking for them, do you tell them the truth about where they're hiding or do you lie and say they're not there.

There are cases where it is difficult to know whether honesty really is the best policy. Honesty may not be the best policy 100% of the time. It may only be the best policy 99% of the time. It may only be the best policy 98% of the time. But there is a big difference between saying honesty is the best policy only 98% of the time and saying it doesn't matter at all.

I don't know what you think, but we seem to be living in an age now where truth doesn't seem to have much value any more. I sometimes hear people talk about the fact that we are

living in an age of post-truth politics. A time when politicians have found that rather than citing facts it is far more effective to make emotional appeals and memorize certain poll-tested talking points. Who needs facts? And frankly the way I hear people talk about truth in recent years, concerns me. People no longer say they're going to tell about their experience, or their going to tell their story, but they're going to tell their truth. As if truth could be your own personal possession. There is no my truth or your truth or his truth, there is only the truth. Well, I can raise concerns all day about the change in the way we treat the truth but that doesn't mean these concerns are not misplaced. So why does the truth matter so much? Why does Jesus say let your yes be yes and your no, no. Well, in the first place, I don't think it takes much imagination to see that our society could not survive for very long if at least some people in our society were not trustworthy. Now, I know that there are some honest politicians and used car salesmen, but imagine for a moment if you would what life would be like if pediatricians and air traffic controllers had the same reputation for dishonesty that used car salesmen and politicians have. What a disaster that would be for our society! You would never want to fly somewhere again. You would never want to take your child to the doctor again. But more importantly, think about this. Think about the first time you found out that someone you trusted lied to you about something important. I bet you've never forgotten it. And I know everyone's experience is different, but I also bet that if you could talk to me about it, you could tell me that it's something you will never forget. And the person who violated your trust may have never beaten you or stabbed you or cut you, but I bet you could also tell me there are few ways that person could have hurt you worse than this. And I know I might be comparing emotional pain to physical pain, but when you live long enough and you are hurt in enough

ways you eventually come to learn that pain is pain. Physical pain hurts emotionally, and emotional pain hurts physically.

It is because the practice of lying to someone is one of the most hurtful things you can do to them that we even lie to ourselves about our own lies. We don't tell ourselves we lie, we say we exaggerated that story, or we engaged in a little advertising or marketing about that car we were selling, we inflated our resume for that job.

But what the gospel does for us is that it exposes our lies. It exposes them because you see our lies try to make everything that is ugly in our lives look pretty. But the gospel comes along and brings all that ugliness up to the surface where we have to deal with it, where we have to face it and where we then have to turn our lives around. You see, Jesus didn't have to go to the cross, he could have lived his life in such a way where he could have avoided offending anyone, where he could have avoided teaching anything that challenged the status quo, but he led his life in such a way that it all led to the cross. And the cross is ugly. But we have to see the ugliness otherwise we don't see what we have done, and we don't have to deal with it, we can keep it swept under the rug. In our modern age, I think few people have understood that about the gospel as well as Martin Luther King. As King knew segregation to be injustice, he knew that so long as people in the civil rights movements never tried to stand up for their rights and provoke white segregationists in the south the ugliness of racism would never come to the surface, it would always be dressed up to look beautiful. But he led non-violent demonstrations which provoked ugly violent reactions so that all this ugliness could come to the surface, as he said injustice was like a boil that could never be cured so long as it was covered up but must be opened in all its ugliness to natural air and light.

Yes, there are hard cases when it comes to the truth. There are some times when it seems that telling the truth will cause unnecessary pain, and avoidable danger. I don't know what to do in all those cases. That's what makes them hard. But to me the most offensive thing in the world is when the church becomes undistinguishable from a society that does not value the truth. Just to use one example, I have little patience for those churches who seem to believe the best way to share the gospel is through some sort of bait-and-switch sales technique. Like a used car salesperson who advertises all the great buys to get you down to the lot but then tells you they're all sold out once you get there, these folks seem to think you should tell people just about Jesus' love and free grace and all the good stuff to get people in the door and once their hooked, it is only then that you tell them about discipleship and stewardship and all that hard stuff. If we in the church are not committed to the full truth, how can we ever really represent hope for the world? How can we ever bring healing to those who have been hurt by all the lies if all we represent is more lies?

Does this dress look pretty? Does this tie look handsome? Do you tell the truth and say no. Are you hiding any Jews in your attic? Do you tell the truth and say yes. Did my husband suffer before he died? Do you tell the truth and say yes. I can't answer these questions. I don't know. But what I do know is that Jesus said "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No', 'No'" "For whatever is more than these is from the evil one." And what I do know is that truth matters, and we should never forget that it matters.