

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

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TO TELL THE TRUTH

Luke 19: 28-44

Israel had a passion for the truth. That's why the Ninth Commandment insists upon truthfulness. The Exodus version reflects a legal context where perjury is forbidden: "You shall not answer against your neighbor as a lying witness." The Deuteronomy version shows a wider concern for truth-telling in all aspects of life: "You shall not answer against your neighbor as a witness of emptiness." So either at court or in normal relationships, Israel set a high premium upon telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, literally, "so help me God."

During the last week of Jesus' ministry, good and decent people, in their anger against this itinerant preacher from

Nazareth, ran roughshod over the Ninth Commandment.

First as “witnesses of emptiness” they spread lies and rumors and insults about Jesus. Then as “false witnesses” they committed perjury against Jesus both before the Sanhedrin and Pilate. That brought to a crescendo the many lies told about Jesus from day one of his ministry. Charges that he performed miracles because he was possessed by a demon or charges that he broke the Law of Moses-all lies.

During his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, his supporters greeted him with “Hosanna”, waving their palm branches and spreading their garments before him. They welcomed him joyfully, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Because Jesus' opponents would not see the truth, they were blinded by a lie. They wanted to silence Jesus' supporters during the procession: "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" They became, in a word, "witnesses of emptiness", peddlers of a deadly deception. In response Jesus challenges their blindness: "I tell you if these were silent the very stones would cry out."

The truth will out; it must be heard. Every effort to suppress the truth is a lie and a cover-up. Jesus' triumphant entry boldly proclaims: "Let the truth ring out from the roof tops, that the King of Glory may come in. Jerusalem, this is the time of your visitation!"

Adolf Hitler in **Mein Kampf** wrote: "The great mass of people will more easily fall victims to a big lie than to a small

one.” The “big lie” against Jesus was that this donkey riding, table overturning militant, was an impostor, a false claimant to the throne of David. The many little lies led to the “big lie” before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court.

Accusers stepped forth and became “false witnesses”. They falsely charged that Jesus said he would “tear down the temple.” They perjured themselves against “the Way and the Truth and Life.” And yet, the Gospels tell us, almost in disbelief, these perjurers could not even coordinate their lies. “For many bore false witness against him and their witness did not agree.” Ah yes, the web of deceit is often a tangled web indeed.

The “big lie” continued when the religious leaders, the guardians of the Ninth Commandment, carried their

baseless accusations before Pilate. The splendor that was Rome resided essentially in her legal system, her ostensible concern for equity and justice. And yet in the governor's palace in Jerusalem perjury prevailed. Falsely accusing Jesus of political insurrection, one lie followed another.

Is it any wonder that Pilate, perhaps exasperated with all the false testimony, blurts out, "What is truth?" Who could discern any truth in this jumble of charges? I have a friend who once served as a prosecutor. She said to me, "After awhile, you come to think that the only time people lie is when they open their mouth."

How many lies had Pilate endured, the "small lies" and the "big lies"? Here the "big lie" triumphed. Perjury against Jesus meant quite simply death. And the "big lie" continued

even afterwards when some claimed that Jesus' disciples stole his body from the tomb. Lies led to Jesus' unjust execution and lies defamed him even after his burial.

For Christians, then, the issue of truthfulness is of paramount importance, most poignantly during Holy Week. In her book **Lying-Moral Choice in Public and Private Life** Sissela Bok traces the three major consequences of lying and deception. First, their impact upon us personally. Second, how lies impact our relationships with others. Third, how deception affects our relationship with God.

Lying, first of all, hurts oneself. The lie causes a loss of face, a loss of self-esteem. The word "integrity" comes from the same roots for "intact" and "untouched". Something deep within us is damaged when we lie. It is painful to

admit, “I too can lie.” Sometimes we discover it is easy to tell a lie, but hard to tell only one. We resort to shoring up our first lie and then become anxious lest it be uncovered. After such careful cultivating of the lie, we then have to admit, “I too am a liar.” The harm to our souls is immense when we succumb to deceit and deception. Peter found out the hard way when the cock crowed after his third denial.

Lying, secondly, directly impacts other people and sometimes the whole community. Augustine famously said, “When regard for the truth has been broken down or even slightly weakened, all things will remain doubtful.” Lies destroy the network of trust between people.

When I was in seminary I spent the summer of 1973 in Washington, D.C. as a student chaplain. I ended up

spending a good deal of time attending the Watergate hearings in the Senate office building. I saw and heard lies big and small that would ultimately bring down the Nixon administration. The parade of perjured witnesses was astonishing and appalling. I have never forgotten that summer. Seems like these days we are seeing a replay of those unsettling days of yore.

I am reminded that Samuel Johnson once said that even the devils themselves do not lie to one another, since the Society of Hell could not exist without truth any more than other societies. Can our society exist when after hearing any newscast or reading any newspaper we are forced to ask, “Who is lying in this story?” Troubling times, for sure.

Jesus wept as he considered that Jerusalem embraced a “big lie” about him. “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace.” Believing the “big lie” about Jesus led to disastrous consequences for the City of David. Lies have destroyed many communities. The “big lie” still has disastrous consequences for our community and our nation.

Lying, thirdly, deeply impacts our relationship with our God, the Lord of truth. To live a lie is to undermine our journey of faith. It leaves us lost and confused. Too often we tell ourselves lies about our true condition, so we try to deceive ourselves. Only the truth, the whole truth, can bring us healing. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God

who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

The truth about ourselves leads to repentance and confession leads to renewal and joy and peace. From the cross we hear yet again Jesus’ words of grace and truth, “Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.” We come to know ourselves as we truly are-sinners saved by God’s grace alone.

Here is what Holy Week calls us to be and do. We are called to tell the truth, to live the truth, and proclaim the truth about God’s grace in Jesus our Lord. Paul says it so well, “Therefore, putting away falsehood, let everyone speak the truth to their neighbor, for we are members of one another.” And he also says, “Speak the truth in love.” It is all

about integrity and wholeness, lining up your life with what you say you believe. And trusting always this promise of Jesus: “You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

Friends in Christ, Holy Week is a clarion call for truthfulness. Being truthful to ourselves, with one another, and most especially with our God. Deception and falsehood are ruled out. Only the truth will make us free, truly free in Christ. “For freedom, Christ has set you free.” Yes and amen!

Thanks be to God!