

The Ninth Commandment - Speaking the Truth in Love

Exodus 20: 16, Proverbs 12:15-28, James 3

A pastor once saw a group of small kids lying in a circle with a dog in the middle. He asked what they were doing. One of the children said: "We were just telling lies, and the one who tells the biggest one gets to keep the dog." The pastor was appalled and said to them: "I am shocked. When I was a little boy, I never even thought of telling a lie." One of the children said: "Give him the dog. He is the winner."

The ninth commandment is about telling the truth in love. God says to the people who are about to enter the promised land of family or marriage or community, if you want to experience shalom, harmony, healthy community life, wholesome relationships, then do not lie about your neighbor – then do not spread false testimony against your neighbor. When your words are seeds of peace in the soul of your neighbor, and you speak the truth in love about your neighbor and yourself you will experience true communion. Communion with God and communion with others.

Jesus said that what comes out of a person defiles a person, judges a person, well that is true for your neighbor too. What comes out of us can defile and judge and even kill our neighbor. That is especially true of our words. Our words, it says in proverbs 18:21 have the power of life and the power of death in them. In chapter 12 of Proverbs it says: that our "reckless words pierce like a sword" "But the tongue of the wise brings healing." Our words can be weapons that separate and injure and kill, but our words can also be the medicine that binds up and brings health.

James, the brother of Jesus, says: the tongue is the smallest part of the body yet it has the greatest effect. The tongue is like a small rudder. It's small movements can change the course of a big ship. The rudder can guide the ship to the safety of open water or it can steer the ship into the rocks. That is the power of words. Those little words that come out of our mouths are like a little spark that can burn a whole forest down.

That is how it happened in the beginning. That is how the snake destroyed the life, and the marriage and family and the personalities of Adam and Eve. With a little twist of the truth, a slight slip of the tongue. "You will not die," Satan said, "you will be like God knowing good and evil." That little spark from between the fangs of that serpent sent a fire raging through the pages of history. A fire that still burns in Afghanistan, and Israel and Africa and in Los Angeles and in the Church and in the Congress and in Sacramento.

With a lie the shalom of God's creation was ruined - destroying the possibility of wholesome human community. Our twisting of the truth can have the same destructive effect. What we say about the good and evil of others can change the story of a person's life. What we say in our desire to be like God knowing and pointing out good and evil we burn the ties that bind. We burn people's reputations and their credibility in the community, and the result is relationships break down and barriers are raised.

And once the spark of gossip or slander or prejudice, or stereotypic attitudes or

condemnations are off our lips, once the line between good and evil is drawn between us and them in our minds, and others, it is impossible to control the damage of the fire.

Once there was a woman who went to confess her sin of lying. She told the priest that she had gossiped about others in the community, and now she was sorry. As penance the priest told her to go out and buy an unplucked chicken in the market and during her walk back to church she was to pull the feathers out, one at a time and drop them along the way. Then she was to return to the priest and he would tell her what to do next.

This woman did what she was told. She bought the chicken, plucked its feathers one by one and returned to the priest. When she came back the priest said: "To complete your penance you must now go back and pick up all the feathers you dropped." "But sir," the woman exclaimed, "you know that is impossible. The wind blew them all away and I could never get them all back."

"Quite true," the priest replied. "Neither can you recall the damaging words about your neighbors which by this time are spreading fires all over the city."

Giving false testimony about your neighbor, putting their reputation in a bad light, harming their place in the community, or their standing in the election, or their right to justice, or making someone get the wrong impression about someone else – all lying where does that come from? The bible says it comes from the heart, from envy and selfish ambitions and fear. Why do we gossip, why do we lie, why do we brag? Envy and selfish ambitions, the desire to be like God, knowing all about good and evil, and wanting to be good and valued causes us to twist other people's words, even God's word, causes us to gossip, to slander, and to condemn people without trial and due process. Fear, envy and selfish ambition, thinking we know all about good and evil and pointing it out in others causes disorder in the community, causes favoritism, says James, prejudice, discrimination. It makes shalom - the peace and joy of God - impossible. Makes gathering around the table of shalom a meaningless show.

God says to us today do not give false testimony against your neighbor, do not spread half truths about them making them the bad guy.

We know what this commandment means: we shouldn't lie, or deceive people. We shouldn't give the wrong impression. We shouldn't be hypocrites. We shouldn't cheat. We shouldn't talk negatively about people. We shouldn't judge people. We shouldn't talk behind people's back and cut them down so that we're lifted up.

We shouldn't do a lot of things. But does this not doing something create a wholesome community? Is this what creates shalom and communion among us? When we don't do certain things? Shalom and community doesn't come when we do nothing.

This ninth commandment encourages us to do something? There is always a positive side to the commandments?

What does the bible tell us? The bible tells us we obey this ninth command when we
Build each other up. When we encourage each other.

When we consider others better than our self. When we see and celebrate the gifts of God in others and invite them to the table as equal brothers and sisters.

Do not judge, instead listen to people, learn the truth about their lives and try to see the good in people, and brokenness in ourselves.

The catechism says that obeying this command means that we should do everything we can to guard and advance my neighbor's good name. Yes even the Muslim and the homosexual and the ex-convict neighbors in our community.

That is how shalom comes to us. That is how wholesome relationships flourish. That is how the Spirit of God builds community. That is how we reach the harmony of the promised land of marriage and family and community – by promoting the good name of our neighbor.

But the question is: is that possible today? Can we by our own will power and our own efforts get control over the words that come out of our mouths? Can we control our words? Can we make sure that by our own efforts we always bring life and healing and wisdom to others? That our words are seeds of peace in the soul of our neighbors? Can we gather all the feathers of our false words, and heal the burns and the hurts they have caused?

The bible and our experience teaches that this is mission impossible. No matter how hard we try we continue to use the devices that the father of lies used at the very beginning. We often say the wrong things and we give the wrong impressions and resort to speaking falsely against our neighbors and about ourselves. And so we need another way to the shalom of the promised land. And that way of truth is the way of Jesus. Jesus is the truth. Jesus is the fulfillment of this commandment.

Jesus was crucified because of the fears and the envy and the selfish ambitions of the leaders of Israel. They had become pros at pointing out the evil and good in others. And this led to people bringing false testimonies forward that condemned Jesus to death. Lies. Their words misrepresented Jesus. Their words were the swords that pierce his hands and his feet and his side. Yet Jesus himself was innocent. Never once did a spark leave his mouth that burned someone else. And so in his death he took the effects and the punishment of breaking the ninth commandment into himself.

The priest in the story about the woman who gossiped said that shalom, true peace and joy, the undoing of fear and envy and selfish ambition comes when we do penances - comes when the effect of our sin is reversed. The bible says that this is impossible to do on our own. Shalom comes only through grace and the power of the cross, though the power of the Holy Spirit. Through forgiveness. Shalom, and community and peace and joy in marriage and family, in church and in business, and even in government doesn't come through our efforts.

In the letter of James chapter four it says: rather than doing penance submit yourself to God. Come near to God, through Jesus, and God will come near to you and help you Resist the devices of the devil. That is Shalom. Humbling ourselves before the cross, and letting God lift us up and make us new by healing the fear and the envy and selfish ambition that burn in our hearts .

That is the fruit of the Spirit. That is the power of God and the gift of God. Being patient, loving and gentle. Having no need to judge, or grumble or speak against our brother or sister, or brag about self, but doing everything we can to advance our neighbor's good name.

As we gather around the cross this morning in the Lord's Supper, we hear the words of life Jesus spoke from the cross. Jesus prayed, father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing or saying. As we gather at the Lord's Supper table today we come near to God and open our hearts to the healing power of the spirit of Jesus, and we invite the forgiving words from the cross to open the way to the peace and the joy and the community of God in the Promised Land.

Eat the bread of life for the complete forgiveness of all your sins.
Drink the cup of blessing for the complete forgiveness of all your sins
With Jesus wounds we are healed.