

August 20, 2023

Speak Truth

Jody Slaughter

"You must not testify falsely against (or bear false witness against) your neighbor."

Exodus 20:16

Have you ever experienced someone saying something about you that wasn't portraying you in the best light; or somebody making a statement about you that was not based on the full story???

Now, flip the same coin and let's reflect on the times WE have not spoken or thought the whole truth and misrepresented someone else...no need to feel shame or judge ourselves harshly, but just to be more aware. This commandment gives us a vision of how God desires for us to live in unity with all creation, by speaking truthfully in love.

Last year, I remember reposting someone's story on social media that I thought was valid and important to be heard in light of several prominent issues in our nation. A good friend from college responded publicly to me on that social media platform. He was very offended by my post and proceeded to quote 10 full scripture passages to share his viewpoint, tell me how wrong I was and that he never believed he would see the day when my heart and soul was turned. He said that he would be praying for me...in a big way, hoping that I may find true light once again. I did not respond on that media post but sent him a private message letting him know I was saddened he had not chosen to ask what was in my heart and soul and asked why he felt the need to publicly blame and shame me. I asked what was going on with him that had led him to misrepresent me.

I never heard from him.

That was a year ago. While it still saddens me, I know it doesn't define me because it was one person's experience of me. My truth is that I am loved unconditionally by God. Of course, I make mistakes and always will...but I, and you, we are all God's beloved children, just as my college

friend is a beloved child of God. We hurt each other at times because we speak falsely. We also are forgiven because of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

And so, many aspects of Jesus teaching in scripture describes how God continually extends grace toward humanity, to heal broken relationships with God and one another. This is the reason why we have taken the summer to look at these Top 10 ways of to live in forgiving, loving communities.

The Israelites did not know a life of being loved unconditionally because they had been slaves of the Egyptians. Just as I shared a few weeks ago, as a couple shares their vows to one another at a wedding, giving a vision for what their relationship can look like, God gave the 10 commandments so that we would know what is possible between God and all of creation.

As we look at this commandment today, focusing on giving a true witness of another, we reflect on these two truths: First, this commandment does not simply tell us to refrain from lying; it really means to say only what you know to be true...in other words, "Speak Truth".

"Truth telling" is a higher standard than "not lying"; Lying is purposely distorting the truth. I may be very angry or hurt and want to hurt someone back. Therefore, I may create a story about someone, hoping to hurt them as much as they have hurt me. Ever heard the phrase, 'hurt people, hurt people'? We do so by telling lies. But truth telling is different...it's waiting to find the facts, then telling the story if it is helpful, but not sharing if it will be hurtful or it is simply not our story to tell.

The second truth I want us to see is that... Bearing false witness, on the other hand, can be the result of inattentiveness, or -- saying something that might be true but hasn't been verified. Repeating a rumor isn't necessarily lying, but it's bearing a false witness. Often times the temptation to bear a false witness can happen when we feel threatened or have the desire to feel superior. If we have these feelings we can bypass the truth directly from a person,

and in turn make assumptions or repeat what someone else has said... gossip. Which is so tempting because we get others join in to help build our case in sharing a story about another. We can create a narrative based on false information that in turn has a life of its own, all with the purpose of self-exaltation by putting down someone else.

I think we can all identify that this can even come into play in our communities of faith. Have you ever been in a prayer group when someone brings up a prayer concern that turns into a gossip session where we overshare and become a bit judgmental? Again, no need to feel shame or judgement, but to be aware.

I remember how I fell into the temptation to bear false witness quite easily a few years ago. We had a family move out of our neighborhood, and then other people seemed to be living there as we saw them from time to time, but there was never a 'For Sale' sign. So, we couldn't figure out who all these various people were. Me and another neighbor were concerned about the "safety" of our street since there were all kinds of cars and people coming to and from that house, at different hours of the day and night. We created several elaborate stories of what could be going on in that house. We literally began to bear false witness against our neighbor.

When we feel unsure or threatened, we may be tempted to bear false witness. The Israelites of the Old Testament certainly had valid reason to feel threatened when they were slaves. God gave them a new way to experience relationships by sharing of the 10 commandments. They had no reason to feel threatened once they were free, but they couldn't know unless they understood a different way.

Bearing a false witness not only applies to others, but also about ourselves. Just listen to yourself... not what you speak out loud, but the internal voice you hear. We may say when we disappoint someone or make a mistake "I'm so stupid." But we know that is not the truth. The inner critic can bear a false witness and grow our

insecurities. Tending to this internal voice requires intentionality and receiving the work of the Holy Spirit. There have been times I have incorporated a spiritual practice to write down the things I tell myself that aren't true so that I can learn to replace them with the truth of how God sees me. As the Spirit helps us rewrite these internal stories our language changes and our fear diminishes...we can begin to experience truth about ourselves.

As Richard Rohr teaches, when we live into our truest sense of self, we will see that words of exclusion or superiority no longer make sense. When we live in trust and partnership with God, then we have no need to bear false witness, we are loved no matter what.

Here's what I hope we remember today: This commandment first helps us to be truth-tellers. To always hold up the power of truth in our relationships with others and our relationship with ourselves. This allows us to live into freedom... freedom to embrace truth and to speak well of others and ourselves.

Second, it reminds us to check out the stories we are telling about other people. Move away from suspicion by learning the truth directly from that person or a trusted source. We can consider the new stories as opportunities for curiosity that moves us into relationships with our neighbors and even with ourselves.

And so, here's the rest of the story about my neighbors...My husband had spent time getting to know the previous man that lived in the house. When he had an opportunity to meet the other man who he saw most consistent at this house, he went over, introduced himself and began a friendship with him. In the process of getting to know him he learned the full story about how this was an extended family member who was renting the house from his brother, the owner and former resident. All the past months of questions and wonderings of which helped me to create an untrue story, began to make perfect sense. I was not allowing a relationship with our neighbor because I chose to have this false story about them. I was reminded

about what happens when we chose to not find out the truth, and how bearing false witness of someone actually prevents us from being in relationships with others.

God is inviting us through these 10 commandments to know God's vision for the world and to continue to live out the Good News of Jesus' love for all people. God's grace empowers us to embody the covenant relationship where we tell true stories of love and grace, extending peace into the chaos of this world. There is chaos because we don't take time to hear more of each other's story.

May we feel the invitation of the commandments, not as rules, but as a way to listen and participate in loving relationship with God and with one another. May we become more aware of the ways we misrepresent the truth of others and ourselves, so we can become truth tellers with love and compassion. As we allow the truth of God's word and the power of the Holy Spirit to help us to feel the embrace of God's love, we can live in the freedom of bearing a true witness of others and ourselves.