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First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

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John 18:37,38; Ephesians 4:25-32

Telling The Truth the Best We Can

(Ninth in series, The Ten Commandments: More Than They May Seem)

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. (Exodus 20:16)

Today's Commandment emphasizes the importance of integrity. *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.* The idea of being a witness implies for our society the judicial system, of being called to the stand and swearing under oath to tell the truth. In a judicial proceeding, before the witness begins to give testimony he or she must answer yes to the following question. "Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

The intention of the Commandment for the ancient Jews was just that. They were to tell the truth about a fellow Jew in front of the authorities. The Commandment was a mandate against character assassination. But who knows the whole truth about anything at any time? We might be especially careful to claim that we do when what we say will have an effect upon the prosperity or reputation of another person.

The difficulty with what might otherwise be a straight forward instruction about integrity is that perceptions about the same situation vary from one person to another. For example, there is the proverbial story of the blind people and the elephant. One blind person touches the trunk and says an elephant is like a hose. Another touches an ear and reports that an elephant is like a fan. Another touches the flank and asserts that an elephant is like a rough hairy wall. Another grabs hold of the tail and says that an elephant is like a snake. Now would any of those people be lying in what they said? Of course not. All were telling the truth from their own limited perspective but none of them completely described an elephant. Would not all of our contact with the world be of this incomplete type? We know something of what of we encounter but can we ever be sure that we know everything about it?

St. Paul reminds us that "now we see as into a mirror, dimly, but then we shall see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I am fully known." (I Corinthians 13:12) Paul is speaking specifically of religious knowledge here but I do not know why the same idea does not apply to other subjects as well. We might be careful when claiming to grasp the absolute truth about anything and also of judging the integrity of others when what they say does not ring true to us. Surely there is such a thing as unintentional miscommunication. We all do it. I have read that in criminal courts

today eye witness accounts are often unreliable. It is not that a witness intends to misrepresent the facts but that observations are not always as clear as we think they are.

So does the ninth Commandment involve only truth telling in court? Would not the implication of the Commandment also include honest communication at other times? And we may think we do rather well at this but how often can we be certain of having communicated clearly on any occasion? And what about metaphors and analogies and poetry? All comparisons are imperfect. That is why they are comparisons. Are we lying when we use them? And when we hold some part of the truth back because we think that it may cause harm in some way? Are we breaking the ninth Commandment then?

It seems to me that if we are going to properly understand the ninth Commandment, and faithfully adhere to it, we must always return to its purpose when measuring our allegiance to it. The ninth Commandment was given to prevent false accusations and injustice and harm toward a person. Like other virtues, the ninth Commandment has its foundation in love. And that means that the motivation behind what we say is all important.

If thus far this morning a rather generous latitude has been allowed for keeping the ninth Commandment, consider a situation in which I think its borders may be drawn too wide. Another national election cycle was recently concluded. I know that you are so very weary of it all now, and yet a closer example of the point this morning might hardly be found. The Washington Post recently reported that the Obama campaign spent 457 million dollars on advertizing, and the Romney campaign spent 356 million dollars. Of all the advertizing done, 85 % of the President's ads were negative and 91 % of Governor Romney's ads were negative. In a phrase which has been often applied in the campaigns, those numbers on negative advertizing are a statistical dead heat. Now, do you think negative ads are honest communication? Are they liable to false accusations and injustice and unfair damage to another's reputation? Is their ultimate motivation grounded in love?

The fact is that negative ads work. Is our susceptibility to their influence an indication of how far our population in general still has to go toward keeping the ninth Commandment? Here's the truth as I see it. Political campaign managers say that no one can win the Presidency or national Congressional or Senate seats without being negative about his or her opponent. Does that not say something about all of us? It is a wonder that we have any respect at all for our political leaders after hearing unmerciful things about them over and over again for months on end.

I have two other thoughts on this. They are somewhat of a contradiction and yet I think they are still credible. On the one hand, negative political ads work because of an innate cynicism on our part. Maybe our suspicious nature is even biblically supported. *All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)* On the other hand, we do vote for one candidate or the other, which suggests that we believe there is more at least to our candidate than that of which he or she has been criticized.

Here is another example. Would gossip be a breaking of the ninth Commandment? I sure think so. Gossipy type speech might be the sine qua non of bearing false witness.

Personally, I have always liked Thumper's rule. Remember Thumper in the movie *Bambi*? When Thumper was laughing at the new born Bambi who with splayed legs showed himself unable to stand on the ice, what did Thumper's mother say to him? *If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.*

Now how well do we think we are doing keeping the ninth Commandment? Perhaps not as well as we thought. Whenever we speak, what we say can have effects upon others; to either enlighten or mislead, to enliven or discourage.

For insight into the absurdity of intentional misrepresentation of fact we might turn to that beautiful race of advanced creatures which Gulliver encountered in his travels, the Houyhnhnms. The Houyhnhnms were horses but on the island upon which Gulliver came upon them they were the most intelligent and reasonable of creatures. The Houyhnhnms had no word in their language for lying. Such a thought as willful miscommunication was so ludicrous to them that none of them practiced it. A passage from Gulliver's description of their perspective suffices to make the point.

And I remember, in frequent discourses with my master concerning the nature of manhood in other parts of the world, having occasion to talk of lying and false representation, it was with much difficulty that he comprehended what I meant, although he had otherwise a most acute judgment; for he argued thus: that the use of speech was to make us understand one another, and to receive information of facts; now, if anyone said the thing which was not, these ends were defeated, because I can not properly be said to understand him; and I am so far from receiving information, that he leaves me worse than in ignorance; for I am led to believe the thing black, when it is white; and short when it is long. And these were all the notions he had concerning that faculty of lying, so perfectly understood, and so universally practiced, among human creatures. (Swift, 267)

And finally, one last passage from Paul.

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:15,16)

Swift, Jonathan. "Gulliver's Travels." Franklin Center, Pennsylvania: The Franklin Library, 1979.