

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Truth”

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John 17:6-19

‘I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

A minister once closed the Sunday service by giving the congregation a homework assignment. He said to them, “Next week I am going to preach on the subject of lying. In preparation for this sermon I want everyone to go home and read the 17th chapter of Mark.” On the following Sunday, when the minister rose to begin his sermon, he checked in with the congregation about their homework. “Now then,” he said, “how many of you did your homework and read the 17th chapter of Mark? If you have read it, please raise your hands.” Not wanting to disappoint the minister, nearly every hand in the congregation shot up quickly. Then the minister said, “You are the very people who need to hear this sermon about lying. You see, there is no 17th chapter in the gospel of Mark!”

The book *The Day America Told The Truth* reports some information that makes it seem as if lying is a way of life for most of us. Of those surveyed, 91 percent said they lied routinely about matters they considered trivial. Around 38 percent said they lied about important things. Parents, please note that 86 percent of youth admitted to lying to their parents, while 75 percent of people said they lied to friend, 73 percent to siblings, and 69 percent to their spouses. These are not very encouraging numbers! I

read an article in Tuesday's *USA Today*. The newspaper is conducting a survey to see how many people lie about their scores when they play golf. They are expecting significant numbers.

In an article entitled *My First Lie and How I Got Out of It*, Mark Twain writes, "I do not remember my first lie, it is too far back; but I remember my second one very well. I was nine days old at the time, and had noticed that if a pin was sticking in me and I advertised it in the usual fashion, I was lovingly petted and coddled and pitied in a most agreeable way and got a ration between meals besides. It was human nature to want to get these riches and I fell. I lied about the pin- advertising one where there wasn't any. You would have done it. George Washington did it, anybody would have done it. During the first half of my life I never knew a child that was able to rise above that temptation and keep from telling a lie."

Twain's words accurately describe our human tendency toward speaking deception. It is routine for us to arrange the facts of our story in an order that might enhance our position in the eyes of the world. In his best selling book of 1983, *People of the Lie*, M. Scott Peck referred to the pretense, the cover-up, and the scapegoating of those who refuse to be honest about their imperfections, those who flee the light of self-exposure and the voice of their own conscience. Peck defined sin as living a lie, separating ourselves from the truth in order to avoid our true selves, attacking and blaming others instead of admitting wrong and seeking change in ourselves. We are good at speaking lies to protect ourselves and to deceive others about who we really are.

Yet it is also natural for us to believe the things that the world says about us. Most of us have become quite proficient about believing the lies we are told about who we really are. We have advertisers who tell us that we cannot be totally fulfilled until we buy their product. We can't be all we can be until we have all the perfume, deodorant, stain remover or energy drink that will make us whole. One recently popular beer commercial urges us to "always stay thirsty" while pointing out how successful and popular we will be if we drink their product. Television and movies tell us that we are not living a full life until we engage in things that bring us the pleasure we deserve. Much of our culture sends us the message that we are not all we can be until we have the best of education, our share of possessions, the most prestigious job, and the best looking family. We have even been told lies by people who love us. While growing up some children are told, "You will never amount to anything." You see, we can use deception to build ourselves up falsely, but deception is used against us to discourage us from being who God created us to be.

The Scripture lesson this morning is from the gospel of John, a section of what is known as Jesus' farewell discourse. Jesus' has just experienced his last meal with his disciples. He has given them their final instructions as to how they might carry on without his physical presence. He has spoken of the promise of a friend, a counselor, the Holy Spirit. And now he turns to God in prayer, lifting up the needs of his followers for God's guidance and protection. This particular prayer has been known for hundreds of years as "The High Priestly Prayer." Jesus prays for his followers as a priest prays for the people of his congregation.

I read a commentary this week that compared Jesus' prayer with a speech given to high school graduates. The disciples are about to leave school and embark upon

ministry in the world. But here Jesus is offering more than rote advice from history and he isn't just throwing out the latest in self-help philosophy. He is trying to forge a link between what they have witnessed in and through him and what they will experience in the time and situations ahead. He prays that the disciples will hear his words whispered and echoed in their heads and hearts, through each circumstance and decision that tests their faith.

Part of Jesus' prayer is that God will protect the followers from the evil one and that they will be sanctified in the truth of God's word. For the writer of John, the evil one was one who would separate people from the truth. Earlier in the gospel John writes that "the devil has nothing to do with truth because there is no truth in him." In the face of all that the world promises and in spite of all that we pretend to be, Jesus prays that God will always reveal to us the truth of our created purpose and our essential nature. Jesus prays that God will speak to us the honest importance of our human value, so that we might measure our worth not against the deceptions of the world, but against the gracious standards of the one who made us. Jesus knew that there would be times and places in life when we would need to know the truth as God sees it rather than the story that we have created or others have created for us. For Jesus, living in the truth meant complying with God's intention.

Lawrence Barr tells a story of a small grocery store owner in Sheridan, Arkansas in the 1940's. A woman came into the store to buy a large chicken to feed some visitors to her home the next day. The owner pushed his hand down into the bin of ice where the chickens were kept and came up with a chicken. When he put it on the scale for weight, the woman remarked, "I need one bigger than that!" So the owner put the chicken back down into the ice and fumbled for another one. To his surprise, he had no other chicken, so he simply pulled the same chicken out and while weighing it, added a hidden finger on the back side of the scale. When the woman saw the scale she confidently declared, "I'll take both chickens!" Barr said the grocer learned a lesson from the episode. He told the story to his sons and it was even repeated at his funeral. The man was embarrassed at not having what his customer wanted. But he was even more embarrassed when he was caught in deception, neglecting the truth of the situation.

In an article on the subject of truth, Cornelius Plantinga Jr. reflects upon the movie *Grand Canyon*. I watched it again recently on one of the cable networks. In the movie a man's fancy sports car stalls in the middle of a bad section of the city, a place where angry young men are armed with guns protecting their turf. The man manages to call a tow truck but before it arrives he is surrounded by street toughs who threaten him with bodily harm. Just in time, the tow truck arrives- and its driver, a good and decent man interrupts the gang's activity and speaks to their leader. He says, "Man, the world ain't supposed to work like this. Maybe you don't know that, but this ain't the way is supposed to be. I'm supposed to be able to do my job without asking you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without your rippin' him off. Everything's supposed to be different than what it is here." Plantinga says that the tow truck driver's words should be in every book of theology. They describe the human predicament. There is a way that things are. And there is a way that things are designed and intended to be by God. One way is the deception of evil in the world. The other is the truth of God that Jesus wants us to see and embrace.

Michael Novak writes that “the more common vices in our lives today are likely to be spiritual: preoccupation, hyperactivity, a failure even to heed the natural rhythms of the body and the sense, distractedness, an instrumentalizing of people and time and activity.” In other words our greatest deception in the eyes of God is our failure to be who we were created to be, to follow the purpose for which we were divinely created, and to listen to truth of God as it is spoken.

There is something greater than the lies we create to falsely build ourselves up and the lies of the world which would tear us down. There is truth. God loves us. We belong to God. Our calling is not an attempt at perfection, but to love and care for all of creation and for others. Our greatest fulfillment doesn't come through achievement or possession. It comes through what God has given us to do. Our greatest joy does not come through earthly pleasure rather from serving as God pleases. Let us measure ourselves by the standards God has graciously set for us. May the truth of God protect us from the deception of the world. May the truth of God sanctify us to lives as God created us to be.