

Carol M. Strickland  
 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia  
 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, August 25, 2019  
 Texts: Exodus 20:16, Mark 14:53-62

**Words to Live By: The Ten Commandments**  
**Ninth Word: Truth**  
**You Shall Not Bear False Witness Against Your Neighbor**

The speed at which falsehoods circulate in cyberspace is astounding. For example, Eric Tucker, a 35-year-old co-founder of a marketing company in Austin had just about 40 Twitter followers.<sup>1</sup> But his tweet following Donald Trump's election about paid protesters being bused to demonstrations against the President-elect fueled a nationwide conspiracy theory — one that Mr. Trump joined in promoting. Within two days Mr. Tucker's post was shared at least 16,000 times on Twitter and more than 350,000 times on Facebook. The problem is that Mr. Tucker got it wrong. And, no doubt, there are examples of folks whose political leanings are the opposite of Mr. Tucker who also get it wrong. In this case, the parked buses Mr. Tucker saw were for participants at a software conference, not Trump protesters. Mr. Tucker was guilty of what we all do—jumping to conclusions. Unfortunately, social media is a magnifier and an accelerator. Falsehoods, rumors, and lies, whether by misinformed private citizens, or nefarious sources which purposely seek to disrupt our bond of societal trust, wreak havoc. Unfortunately, they can have deadly consequences.

I have only to say the place names--El Paso, Charlottesville, Christchurch, Pittsburgh, Orlando—and images of bloodshed, chaos, and death flash before you. The hatred that fueled these carnages is inextricably entwined with falsehoods about the groups that were targeted. You know the tropes and stereotypes, and I'll not repeat them here because they are lies. And they are all over cyberspace! It is absolutely alarming to us that anyone could possibly believe the slurs and nonsense which whiz around the internet purporting to be “truth,” much less take violent and deadly action.

This, however, is nothing new.

Dial back your clocks back to the years 1941-1945. [You do understand dial, don't you? I know it's such a 20<sup>th</sup> century/analog image!] The place is occupied Europe. Helpless citizens were murdered in pogroms and mass shootings. Others were literally worked to death in concentration camps. Still others died from cruel medical experiments. Sealed freight trains transported victims to gas chambers built to kill hundreds at a time. Some 6 million Jews and another 5 million others--gays, priests, Roma people, those with mental or physical disabilities, communists, trade unionists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Slavs, and resistance fighters –died at the hands of Nazis. Why? Because their elimination was based on the ideology of Nazism which embraced the fake news of the superiority of the so-called Aryan race, “proven” by science. It is inconceivable to us that such racist falsehoods took hold and spawned such a horrific event as the Holocaust.

And yet they did.

Dial back farther now.

It was night. Jesus was praying in a grove of olive trees with a few of his disciples. A mob sent from the chief priests, legal experts, and elders appeared. The gnarled trees cast deep shadows in the torchlight. Swords glinted. Clubs dangled from their bearers' hands. The betrayer did his dirty work with a kiss. Jesus was grabbed and arrested. In the chaos, a man lost his ear and Jesus' friends all fled.

Jesus was led down from Gethsemane to the quarters of the high priest. Waiting there for him were the Sanhedrin, the religious leaders who had sought to get rid of Jesus since the early days of his ministry.<sup>ii</sup> The Sanhedrin was the supreme council for the Jews headed by the chief priest. It had jurisdiction over religious, civil, and criminal matters. It functioned as a kind of grand jury for the Jews, to ascertain whether or not to bring a case to the Roman authorities. However, a nighttime gathering was highly irregular, and on Passover, it was strictly against Jewish law. It was clear that these guys had it in for Jesus. Some offered trumped up charges. Others lied and misquoted him. But none of it added up. In frustration the chief priest asked Jesus point blank, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" When Jesus answered truthfully, the chief priest made a show of ripping his robe and retorted, "Who needs witnesses? The man's a blasphemer. Case closed." Unanimously, the council declared that Jesus deserved the death penalty. Then like schoolyard bullies, some spit on him, blindfolded him, and hit him. When they tired of this amusement, they went home to their waiting wives and soft beds while the guards roughed Jesus up some more. In the morning he was bound and taken to Pilate.

Again, we are shocked at the injustice and brutality, at the lies and deception. Those given the responsibility of upholding the law, which clearly stated that the testimony of two or three witnesses was required to sentence a man to death, had flagrantly violated it.<sup>iii</sup>

Actually, though, not everyone deserted Jesus. Peter had followed the entourage to the high priest's courtyard. Warming himself by the fire, he shifted nervously from foot to foot. He thought back on the evening's events that felt surreal now. What had begun as a festive holiday meal together with friends turned somber when Jesus began talking about body and blood and betrayal. Then that prayer vigil at Gethsemane. And now this. Things were quickly spiraling out of control, and a knot of fear was growing in his gut.

Trying to act inconspicuous, Peter nevertheless attracted the attention of an observant servant girl who became his prosecuting attorney. "You were with Jesus, the fellow from Nazareth, weren't you?" "I don't know what you're talking about." "I'm sure this man was one of them." "No way." "You've got to be one of them; you've got Galilean written all over you." "I swear, I never laid eyes on the guy." Ironically, while his teacher, friend, mentor, and lord was inside assailed by false witnesses, Peter, was outside lying through his teeth. Just then, a cock crowed and he gulped. And we, with him.

Might we also have been among the German Christians who supported the Nazis, we wonder? Surely not, and yet, the majority were. They included dedicated pastors and scholars. One was Gerhard Kittel. His classic *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, still used in seminaries, was given to me as a gift by my internship church. The multi-volume set took up a whole shelf. How could such a prodigious mind be convinced that Christianity and Nazism were compatible? But many were. The "Guiding Principles" document of the German Christian movement, stated that "race, ethnicity, and nation [are] orders of life give and entrusted to us by God who has commanded us to preserve them."<sup>iv</sup> It demanded that the nation be

protected against the “unfit and inferior.”<sup>v</sup> It justified the state as the head of the church, rather than Jesus Christ.

It may have just been easier to go along and get along.

But not everyone. A minority balked at what they saw as the perversion of the gospel. Martin Niemoller, a Lutheran pastor, was one of the founders of the Confessing Church which stood in opposition to the Nazification of the church. He penned these now famous words:

*First, they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.*

*Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out— because I was not a trade unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.*

And come, they did. Niemoller spent eight years in concentration camps.

The ninth of the Ten Commandments says, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” It minces no words. Speaking untruthfully against another is forbidden.

Originally, this commandment arose out of the legal context of Israel. Its intent was to protect against false accusation. Then as now, it was considered better for a hundred guilty people go free than one innocent person to be wrongfully convicted.<sup>vi</sup> A trustworthy judicial system was and is vital for stable community.

But the import of the Ninth commandment reaches beyond the courtroom. As Ryan keeps reminding us, the Ten Commandments are not so much rules as they are a framework for relationships. The Ninth Commandment recognizes truthfulness as the bedrock of healthy relationships. Forbidding false witness against the neighbor means speaking truthfully to others in love, not malice; speaking well of them when you can; and respecting them. Forbidding false witness means not damaging the dignity or reputation of other persons. It prohibits libel and gossip.

There’s a Hasidic story about a man who went through town slandering the rabbi. One day, feeling remorseful, he begged the rabbi for forgiveness and offered to do penance. The rabbi told him to take a feather pillow, cut it open, and scatter the feathers to the winds. The man did so, but when he returned to tell the rabbi that he had fulfilled his request, he was told, “Now go and gather all the feathers.”

The man protested, “But that is impossible.”

“Of course it is. And though you may sincerely regret the evil you have done and truly desire to correct it, it is as impossible to repair the damage done by your words as it will be to recover the feathers.”

Prejudice against your neighbor is also included in the scope of the Ninth Commandment. Who is my neighbor, you may ask. Someone did ask Jesus just that, and got a story about fellow robbed and beaten up and left for dead. Two people of status and privilege who were also quite religious, couldn’t be bothered to stop. But a third who belonged to a group hated by the robbed man’s group stopped and helped. He not only rendered first aid. He also saw to the victim’s future care, paying out of pocket for room and board until the man got back on his feet. Who was the neighbor? Neighbor, the questioner had to admit, is the one who acted compassionately toward the other.

Compassion requires erasing all bias. Love for neighbor has no room for prejudice. Looking down on others because they look different, speak another language, vote for people

you don't like, follow a different religion, or in any other way are not like you is wrong. We are to love our neighbors and not do or say anything that hurts them, including condoning unfairness and passing by on the other side. Someone's life may well depend on it. Our society's life *does* depend on it.

So, dialing back to the present, before you hit the send button on a juicy tidbit, before you disparage a colleague behind her back, before you retweet a derogatory comment, or don't check your facts, or refuse to listen respectfully to another point of view, or fail to stand up for someone bullied, or can't be bothered to protest an injustice, or turn a blind eye to prejudice, or fail to examine the contents of your own heart, look at your nine fingers and stop yourself.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. Period.

Stop yourself. And then do something compassionate, something constructive, something positive for your neighbor whom God commands you to love.

---

<sup>i</sup> Sapna Maheshwari, "How Fake News Goes Viral: A Case Study," *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/business/media/how-fake-news-spreads.html> on 8/22/19

<sup>ii</sup> Mark 3:6

<sup>iii</sup> Deuteronomy 17:6, 19:15

<sup>iv</sup> Paul McGlasson, *Choose You This Day*, (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019), p. 3.

<sup>v</sup> Michael Kinnamon, "W. A. Visser 't Hooft's confrontation with nationalist idolatry among Christians," *The Christian Century*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/w-visser-t-hooft-s-confrontation-nationalist-idolatry-among-christians> on 8/22/19

<sup>vi</sup> Eugenia Gamble, "Love Carved in Stone," *2019 Horizons*, Presbyterian Women in the PCUSA.