

SUNDAY JANUARY 14
9:00AM | 11:00AM

TELL THE
TRUTH

WORD
POWER

JANUARY 2024
SERMON SERIES



Sunday, January 14, 2024
Baptism of the Lord | “Tell the Truth”
Charlie Berthoud | Exodus 20:16, Ephesians 4:15

It sounds pretty straightforward: tell the truth. Sometimes it is.

One early scriptural mandate for truth telling is in the Ten Commandments, from the book of Exodus, which many of us are reading this month.

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” -Exodus 20:16

In other words, you shall tell the truth about your neighbor.

This teaching was used primarily in disputes among people about thievery and violence. We need to remember that Moses and the Hebrews didn’t have access to fingerprints, DNA analysis, or security cameras. Thus, it took confirmed witnesses to convict anyone of something.

In some contexts, if it became clear that someone was lying to incriminate someone else, the liar would then face the punishment of the crime in question.

From this commandment we see that truth impacts others. Truth telling is good for society.

Fast forward to our times, especially the last 10 or 20 years, which could understandably be called the age of “alternative facts” with politicians and other trusted officials—including some religious leaders—brazenly lie and repeat those lies so much that people believe them.

Joseph Goebbels, head of Nazi propaganda, is reported to have said, “If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it.” Even if he didn’t say that, there are politicians today who seem to live by that.

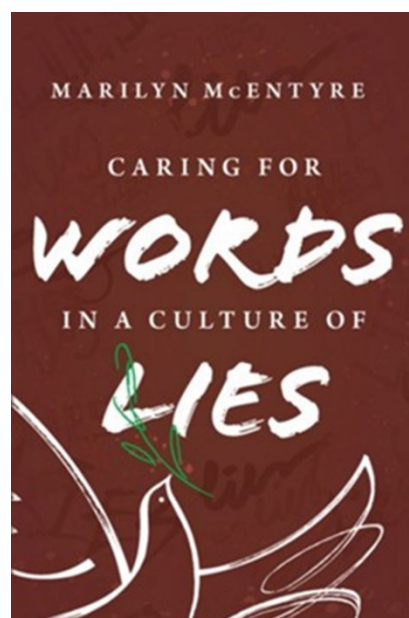
Part of the inspiration for having this WORD POWER series now is because of the election of 2024, where various truth claims are under scrutiny. We thought it would be good to remind each other of the importance of words in our current climate. Today is the second of five weeks in our focus on words.



In this environment of “alternative facts”, I’m grateful for people who remind us of the importance of truth-telling.

In her delightful book *Caring for Words In A Culture of Lies*, author Marilyn McEntyre calls us to the hard work of truth telling:

If there is to be health in the body politic and in our faith communities, healing involves naming the insults and offenses. It involves holding each other and our leaders accountable. It means clarifying where there is confusion; naming where there is evasion; correcting where there is error fine-tuning where there is imprecision; satirizing where there is folly; changing the terms when the terms falsify. (p. 60)



Telling the truth is a collective responsibility; it’s part of a healthy society.

While it’s hard to be in an age of alternative facts, the good news is that eventually truth seems to prevail, in society and in faith. Over time we have learned all sorts of truths, like:

- The sun does not revolve around the earth
- Smoking is not good for our health

As for our country, we continue to learn about truth. The second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence boldly announces:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that

among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

However “these truths” apparently weren’t self-evident for women, slaves, Native Americans, and people without property.

We have moved closer to equality for everyone, but we’re not there yet. Truth can be aspirational and elusive.

We need to keep an open mind for new truth, and be ready to discard former truth.

We’re in midst of discovering new truth right now in our culture and world as we collectively are learning more about transgender people and non-binary people.

It doesn’t take much digging to realize that truth isn’t always simple and clear. It’s not always black and white. Sometimes the things we believe turn out to not be true. So we have to keep an open mind.

So how do we discern the truth? Again, McEntyre is helpful:

We must listen with all our might, with all our will discern, laying aside our very human desire to be right with a prayer that we may be faithful.

[Prayer of confession]

So, we do our best to discern what is true, and in general we need to tell the truth. But there are circumstances we may need to stretch the truth, or even plain out not tell the truth.

But if we’re going to stretch the truth, we need to be thinking of the greater good.

Let’s pretend that a loved one gets a new shirt, which they love but everyone else thinks is ugly. You probably don’t want to just say “It’s ugly and everyone thinks so.” You’d want to be a little more diplomatic.

I googled ugly t-shirt and found this Hawaiian shirt where you can include your own face on the shirt. Isn’t it “beautiful”?

More significantly, you might need to lie to



save someone from harm. If an enraged co-worker with a weapon is looking for your friend who is hiding in your bedroom, it's OK to tell that person you don't know where they are. In that situation it's definitely OK to lie.

In between these examples are all sorts of shades of gray.

Guidance here comes from scripture. Ephesians 4:15 calls us to speak the truth in love.

“...Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...”

Sometimes, with our humble discernment of what is best, we don't tell the whole truth.

Those of you reading Exodus may have noticed the big lie in chapter one. The Hebrews are in Egypt, and the king is trying to get rid of them, so he orders the midwives to kill the baby boys. Two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, defy the king, refusing to kill the baby boys, instead telling the king that the Hebrew women give birth fast, before the midwives arrive.

“But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, ‘Why have you done this and allowed the boys to live?’

The midwives said to Pharaoh, ‘Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.’ So God dealt well with the midwives....”

They lied, but they lied to save lives. And the text makes it clear that God was OK with the lie.

I don't think it's a coincidence that it was two midwives, not just one. If I was trying to discern a deeper truth, or considering lying with good intentions, or mustering up the courage to defy the power of empire, I wouldn't want to do that alone. I imagine Shiphrah and Puah talked and debated and probably prayed about their “lie” and decided it was worth the risk, to serve the greater good.

I want to close with one of Emily Dickinson's best loved poems, which begins:

*Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies*

*Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise*

The poem seems to suggest that truth is elusive. Some interpreters hear this poem in terms of the Christian gospel, that it takes a while for us to figure out what new life in Christ is all about. Certainly, we remember that Jesus himself said “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

Here at Covenant, we recognize that the Christian life is a journey—a journey toward healing, courage, purpose, and truth. That journey requires faithful persistence.

On this Sunday when we remember baptisms and ponder the elusive nature of truth, it is appropriate to close with the words I share at every baptism, words from 1 John 3, words that reminds us that we are all God’s children, words which I consider to be core truth:

*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God,
and that is what we are.*

Let us pray.