Sunday, July 15, 1979
THE NINTH COMMANDMENT
Exodus 20:16; Matthew 12:33-37; James 3:6-10

The old saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me,” is only partially true. Words can be very harmful. The ten commandments take this fact into account. Two of the ten have to do with the use of words, the third, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain,” and the ninth, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

The New Testament in the Bible also contains a number of warnings about the wrong use of words. Jesus Christ said, “I tell you on the day of judgment you will rend.er account for every careless word you utter. For by your words, you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned.”

In the Letter of James, the human tongue is compared to a fire and the writer warns us that a great forest can be set ablaze by a small fire. We are warned therefore to be careful how we use our mouth and our tongue in the forming and speaking of words.

An ancient story tells of a king who sent two· of his ser-vants out with these instructions. One was to bring back the greatest thing that mankind has ever known, and the other was to bring back the worst and most destructive thing that mankind has ever known. Both, according to the story, returned with the human tongue.

From our ability to speak come forth words that express love, caring, bring peace, give blessings, and inspiration. It was the power of human speech that gave Socrates, Isaiah, Abraham. Lincoln, Winston Churchill and others their immense influence and as part of their gift of leadership.

But from the same gift of speech can also come lies, gossip, slander, curses, words of hate, words which we wish we had never said, words that deeply hurt others. Violent language, words of prejudice can be as harmful as violent deeds and often lead to these deeds. Adolph Hitler used the power of speech to lead a nation in the wrong direction, while at the same time, Winston Churchill used the power of speech to save England from destruction by the Nazis.

How we use the gift of speech, what we do with our words may express the inner being of a person more than anything else. Thus, Jesus Christ said, “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks, the good person out of good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of evil treasure brings forth evil.”

Let’s now look more carefully at this 9th commandment which deals with the use of words. What are some of the things it means? “You shall not bear false witness!”

1. First, the commandment had its origin in describing how a witness should testify in a court of law. It’s a commandment against perjury. To lie as a witness when a person is on trial is to strike a blow at the very center of the system of justice. Thus, in most societies, the penalty for perjury is very serious. According to the Old Testament, one who bears false witness when someone is on trial should be punished with the same penalty as the person on trial would’ve received if convicted.

The Romans would hurl the bearer of false witness to his or her death from a cliff. The Egyptians would cut off the nose and ears of one found guilty of bearing false witness in a trial. All of these were ways of recognizing that one who would destroy another person with a lie was a destructive element that society could not tolerate. But there's more to this 9th commandment than this.

2. A second meaning and implication is much broader and relates to all of us all the time. It warns us to be care-ful with our words. Spreading rumors, passing on lies, using innuendos can hurt. They hurt the victim. They hurt the originator. They hurt the carrier. Careless words destroy the fabric of society. They breed distrust.

A lie was told and spread about a much-respected man in a community. The victim, when he began to hear these things about himself, went and confronted his accuser with the facts that made the lie obvious. The originator of the false story finally apologized and asked if there was anything he could do to right the terrible wrong he had done. The elderly man walked into the bedroom and took a feather pillow from the bed. Taking out his knife, he split the pillow open and then going to a window dumped the feathers from that pillow into the breeze so that they blew in every direction. "Here's what you can do," he said, "You can go out now and gather up all those feathers and put them back inside this pillow." "But sir," protested the other man, "That's impossible! I could never recover all those tiny feathers." "Quite right," the old man agreed, "just as impossible as it is for you to recover all the hurt and pain that your malicious rumors and outright lies have done to me. You cannot recover the suspicion that you have sown. That can never be completely undone."

What we're talking about here can sometimes be described as plain simple gossip, and all of us participate in the spreading of gossip and thus break the 9th commandment-- "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."

Why is gossip so tempting and prevalent? Because gossip is often an insidious attempt by an insecure person to exhibit power. By passing on gossip, a person is announcing that he or she is important, in the know; that he or she has sources of information that others do not have. The more important the subject of gossip, the more the neurotic needs of the gossiper are supposedly served.

Movie fan magazines are thus filled with gossip items, and people buy the magazines by the millions. Gossip newspapers are sold at the checkout stands of most supermarkets and they are best sellers. The headlines usually promise to give some secret sordid information that can be gotten nowhere else. The gossip business is a multimillion-dollar industry which feeds on the private lives, mostly imagined of public figures.

Another factor figures into the spreading of gossip. Often when a person passes on gossip, he or she is in fact putting the victim down. And many of us falsely believe that by pulling someone down, we go up. It's the pulley system of attempting to gain self-esteem. On this pulley system, we believe that we go up when someone else goes down, and conversely that we go down when someone else goes up. Our emotional position keeps shifting in relation to the position of others.

We forget, however, that if I meet someone who preaches better than I, this does not diminish my own talents. I still have exactly what I had before, no more, no less. That person's gifts do not devalue mine, nor do mine devalue someone else's. Yet many of us judge ourselves on

this false oasis. That person's gifts do not devalue mine, nor do mine devalue someone else's. I still have exactly what I had before, no more, no less.

Our human society is not a pulley system. God has not made the world or us so that we improve only at the expense of others going down. We each have our own value, our own distinctive gifts, and our limitations. And the tragedy is that so long as we seek to build ourselves up, by pulling others down, we in fact only isolate ourselves more than ever. We never provide for ourselves the love and self-esteem we need by pulling someone else down.

3. There is yet a third form of bearing false witness which we are all subject to from time to time but often without realizing it. The kind of false witness I'm talking about arise out of human ignorance, not just the ignorance of now knowing enough facts, but the ignorance of being unaware of or insensitive to human nature. I'm ta1king about the kind of human ignorance that feeds prejudice and distorts our view of the world, that kind of ignorance that perceives a part of the truth and proclaims it to be the whole truth; that kind of ignorance that repeats false and prejudicial assumptions.

Here's what I mean. In a debate some time ago in a national church meeting, a black man made some highly critical, judgmental statements about the United States. He called this nation an "oppressive state," one that broke the spirit of many of its citizens. In the debate, he was quickly challenged. by an executive vice president of a major United States corporation, who extolled. this country's virtues as if God were only on our side and we were almost perfect. He praised American business as the savior of the world.

Now if any of us had been present and listening to this debate, we would've discovered that both speakers were absolutely convinced of the truth of their point of view. Yet each one had a part of the truth, but not the whole truth. Each speaker viewed this country through his own experience and with his own interpretation of that experience. The black man had grown up in poverty and was not allowed to register to vote until late in life. He was the product of an inferior segregated. school system which used hand-me-down books that came from white school systems, while at the same time listening to white people proclaim that it was a separate out equal school situation. He had listened while white politicians talk about the abuses of the welfare system and at the time were feeding massive federal aid into some struggling business corporations.

The white business executive, on the other hand, had spoken out of his experience. He saw a different situation. He saw a land of unlimited opportunity, where one with ability could climb the corporate ladder to success and affluence, for that was his experience. He saw the ingenuity and the ability of people being rewarded.

Having never been the victim of prejudice, he tended to be judgmental about those who could not and did not make it within the system as he had. In all likelihood he held the view that those who did not succeed were actually inferior. He was confident that people like himself who rule the business establishment do so because they have innate ability. He did not understand the distortion that enters the human spirit with prejudice.

The point is that both of these viewpoints were accurate descriptions of the way each of these people had experienced the same country. Yet both of them were guilty of being ignorant. Both of them had taken their partial narrow experience and elevated it to the total experience and the whole truth. Each in his own way was bearing false witness.

The way I perceive reality is not the way reality is. The way you perceive reality is not the way reality is to further complicate the problem, most of us only rub shoulders with people who think like us and see the world the way we see it. So, we spend a lot of time reinforcing each other's prejudices until we honestly believe that we know and have the whole truth.

We Christians make the same mistake. Church and church denominations as well as individuals, will often act as if they have the whole truth and anyone who disagree will go to hell. There was an ad in the local newspapers last weekend with that angle of vision. That is bearing false witness. Sometimes we act as if we can explain all there is to know about God. Words can point to God, but words can never explain or completely describe God. Creeds can be formed to contain truths, but creeds can never be formed that will exhaust the truth. God is bigger and more mysterious than any human frame of reference which tries to contain God.

No human system of thought can ever be ultimate. Christian history is dotted with examples of the disastrous results of small minds who elevated their partial truths to the level of the ultimate so that they could feel secure and be convinced they were right and all others wrong. Then their religion became a club with which they beat into submission anyone who did not agree or tried to scare them into submission and always in the name of God.

To be unaware of the many dimensions of life, to be insensitive to the realities beyond our own narrow existence, to talk to no one save people who mirror our own prejudices back to us, and then to spout those prejudices as the whole truth, this is to bear false witness.

Christianity itse1f is a human system. God is not even a Christian. Our Christian faith is always being contaminated by our own limited narrow view of existence. We hope that our Christian faith points toward God, and helps us experience God in a deeper sense, but God can never be limited to our Christian context. Until we accept this our religious arrogance will violate God's words against bearing false witness.

To follow Jesus Christ is a pilgrimage and an exploration that leads us into an unknown tomorrow where there are no absolute landmarks and no certainties, where there is only the faith that God will be in every tomorrow if we but have the courage to enter ft, to be open to it, to live in it, to be who we are without fear. The Christian life is always the life in process; it never arrives. Once you arrive with your Christian conviction, you become an idolater.

Christians are not keepers of museums who gather to admire the treasures of yesterday. We are rather the bearers of the call of God to break every barrier, to expand every creed, every synthesis of yesterday and to walk by faith into tomorrow, always searching and exploring and expecting new revelation.

You shall not bear false witness is thus a call to escape the ignorance that plagues and distorts all human beings. It is a call to come out of the ignorance of our killing prejudices, the blindness of presuming that our view of life is the whole truth, the slavery that comes from identifying our partial truth with the ultimate truth.

When we begin to recognize and acknowledge our limitations, our blindnesses, then the need to bear false witness begins to fade and the search for more and new truth becomes exciting and our lives take on new meaning. Amen.