



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, April 14, 2013
The Third Sunday of Easter

Festal Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.
on
Exodus 20:16
Deuteronomy 5:20
+

Sermon Series: Commandments as Good News
SERMON 10: NO FALSE WITNESS

Many theologians have thought that the negative commandments (the “thou shalt nots”) are commandments that people could figure out on their own. This is especially said to be the case with the four—murder, adultery, stealing, false witness. We don’t need God telling us in order to know that these are wrong; all on our own, as it were, we could figure it out. Aquinas’s view, for instance, was just that; but he thought also that it was rather nice of God to spell these things out for us, since we often make mistakes by ourselves. We don’t always think as clearly as we could.

And so God said, *Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor* (Ex. 20:16). The literal meaning of this commandment concerns testimony in court. In court, your witness must be true. We might think about why this is so. False witness subverts the point of courts, which is to see that right prevail, that justice be done. If witnesses are false, or cannot be presumed to be truthful, then we aren’t going to have justice, and as a result we couldn’t live together with each other. Wrongdoing wouldn’t be punished, and innocent people would be condemned; punishment and reward would be just a kind of lottery.

So: in order to live together, we need justice, and thus: do not bear false witness. Yet the commandment can hardly mean that we are to tell the truth in court, but everywhere else lying is okay. Why doesn’t it say so? Here God turns our attention to the fact that we human creatures are creatures who speak.

Consider: this is the first commandment that addresses our language specifically in relationship one with another. Only one other commandment deals with speech directly, and that is the prohibition on using the Lord’s Name in vain. The remainder of the commandments have implications for our speech but they are not first off about our speech. We could, for instance, have no idols—we could keep the sabbath and honor our parents—we could avoid murder and adultery and stealing and envy: all without focusing upon our speech in itself. In contrast, not bearing false witness points us to our character as linguistic animals: we are the beast who talks. And unlike, it seems, all other animals, we are the beast who can talk falsely.

So, don’t do it. But why, again, does the command limit itself to false witness? Why doesn’t it just say, “Thou shalt not tell lies”?

The answer is not, I think, the question of the white lie, a falsehood told out of delicacy; nor does it have to do with the justifiability of lying to protect human life. The commandment, I think, is taking us deeper.

For in our speaking with one another, a lot of what we say is not made up of true-or-false sentences. In fact, most of our speaking is not reportage. For we are the beast who writes poems and sings complicated sagas. We have Homer and Virgil and Dante and J. R. R. Tolkien, none of whom were doing true-or-false reportage and yet what they did with language was very important. Humans can think in terms of what might have been and what has been, we can imagine what could be, we have the ability to entertain alternative worlds and tell stories about them, and all that is wrapped up with being human. Now such linguistic efforts are nought but hostages ready to be flattened out if we accept the claim that our speech should always bear literal witness to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. For literalists are always suspicious of stories; they take stories to be essentially falsehoods. (Fred Craddock reports that his mother used “story” as a verb meaning “to tell untruth.” “Don’t you story me, son” she would say.)

So the commandment, focusing on human language yet not explicitly forbidding all lying, raises the question of what truth-telling means for us creatures when we are not testifying in court. And this takes us to what I think is the fundamental consideration: this commandment has been given to us by a God who is himself a speaking being. The biblical revelation tells us that God creates by speaking. And what he speaks is a story in which we are characters.

Let me point to a couple of fundamental Christian claims. First, when God set about to save us from our sins, he didn’t do it by sending us a word document. God’s Word had to become flesh. He had to become a person among us, a character in the history, the story, in which we also are characters. There was no other way to “speak” the truth than to take part, decisive part, in our common story.

Think, too, of the fundamental Christian datum that Jesus spoke in parables. There was no other way for him to convey his message. Parables are stories that invite our participation, and that’s the only way to find out what they mean. Listen to the parable of the prodigal son. Why does the one son leave; why does the father watch for him; why does the other son sulk? The truth—the message—of the parable is about the relationship of God’s mercy and justice, but how God’s mercy and justice fit together is not something that we can put into a true-or-false statement. The only way to get at it is to tell the parable. And in the end, the only way for us to get the truth about the relationship of mercy and justice in God was for God to enter into our story, to teach, to be crucified, to be raised.

So this commandment has a literal meaning—do not testify falsely—and a deep meaning for Christians—so to shape our speech that it (our speech) and we (who are characters in a history alongside God’s speech himself) are true. The two meanings cannot be separated. In fact, they can collide catastrophically. Saint Matthew tells it: “At the last came two false witnesses, and said, This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days” (26:60f.). They weren’t entirely lying, for Jesus had said something like that, but they twisted his words, and their characters failed to be true.

The false witnesses show us, as in a negative, what we aspire to, in deep fulfilment of this commandment. Do not bear false witness, but tell stories and live in stories that are godly and true to Christ.