

“The Truth is Central to Survival”

2 Samuel 11: 1—15, 26-13

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The Presbyterian Church, throughout its history, has had 6 Great Ends, which is to say 6 ultimate goals. One of those six goals is “the preservation of the truth.” Truth is not capitalized on this list: It is not a predetermined, detached certitude, obvious to everyone. Nor does it refer simply to Jesus as the truth. No, it is a broader goal in society and the world. The goal of the church is to do the hard work to discern and fight for truth.

How important is the truth? Harvard Philosopher, *Sisella Bok* says in her classic ethics book *Lying and Moral Choice*, “The truth is central to survival.” The bible story today is all about what happens when the King lies, the reverberations that follow, and the question, will society ever recover from the lies. It is not about one lie, but a series of deceptions.

The story begins: “In the spring when Kings go out to war.”

Kings are leaders based on particular virtues. Courage. Fortitude. Trust. *Semper Fi*. Kings lead their troops. Except, as is made explicit, not King David: he is not in the field with his troops. Instead, he’s relaxing at home, watching Sports channel.

It’s one kind of a lie to call yourself a King but not act like a king.

In the drama of life, this king does not act out his part in the play.

His deception makes him anxious: the Bible says he can’t sleep. He goes out to the roof to get some evening air. With time on his hands, he turns into a voyeur: a peeping Tom leering off the balcony at the woman next door. The king – the spiritual leader of his people – reveals his lack of character by his lurid activities. Again, to be in the role of king, but not act with the character of a king, is another kind of deception.

The King starts asking his servants questions about the woman. He finds out she is another man’s wife. This questioning is a comment on his character again. Moreover, the people of whom he makes inquiries must wonder about the deceptiveness of their king asking about another man’s wife. The people become involved in his deception. The king is something of a petri dish in which the lies start to grow. And now they starts to spread. Lying has a social dimension.

The king orders his servants to bring the woman, a subject in his kingdom, to him. People of power have a duty not to misuse their role to unduly influence those within their care. He

misused his role and power to coerce a woman to come have sex with him. This is another deception. Think of the professional ethics of a doctor: doctors don't date their patients. It's unethical to pretend you are caring for them, when, in fact, you are seeking to meet your own needs. So it is with the king. Another deception.

He does not take precautions and she ends up bearing a child he does not want. To have sex with someone implies obligations regarding possibly having children. The king's first response is to try to deceive the husband of the woman to believe the child is his. The attempt at deception is another form of lying. Add to that, the affair also involves a breach of trust between Uriah and Bathsheba – the king's lie spreads to infect husband and wife.

King David then misuses his role as head of the Armed Forces. He hatches a plan to manipulate one of his lieutenants. Again, another deception, another form of lying.

Finally, the King hatches a plan to have his top General manipulate the other soldiers to kill this lieutenant. The General knows pulling back the other troops to have Uriah killed is a deception. Presumably the troops have to wonder too. The Military leader and the troops know that this is betrayal, disloyalty, murder and a lie. They all go along with the King because they trust him. But his reasons are deceptions. Now the military becomes part of the system that is infected with lies.

To the point, this is not one lie; it is a series of lies that end up infecting the social system around the king. It is not a thing that is wiped away easily. When the prophet Nathan confronts him with his lie, David gives a facile "mea culpa." But he does not deeply change, nor does he address the ways his lies have infected they social systems around him.

If you read the rest of the story of King David, you see from this point on, his life becomes tragic. Prior to this, he was the most loved King of Israel, but these lies led him to a tragic life, and his country is weakened.

There are many insights to be considered in this story. To begin with, this poignant story makes the classic point: lying harms the liar themselves. The liar is seeking more power, but the dynamics of lying leaves the liar eventually with decreased power. James Whiting makes the distinction between small lies and big lies using the image of a ladder. At the top of the ladder is a perfectly open and honest relationship. If one makes some minor deception, e.g. exaggerating one of your accomplishments, it does not appear to be a big deal. Perhaps one can stop oneself at that point.

But minor evasions of the truth may lead one to break through one or two rungs of the ladder. Maybe you can stop yourself there, but maybe not. The problem is, once you slip down one or two rungs, you have downward momentum. You may just keep going as the lying gets easier and seems to be more necessary to cover up past lies. One may fall all the way down. Falling down to the bottom of the ladder is the way of complete deception, and destruction.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in *The Gulag Archipelago*, writes:

“And the lie has, in fact, led us so far away from a normal society that you cannot even orient yourself any longer; in its dense, gray fog not even one pillar can be seen.” Lying has an impact both on the liar and those deceived: the fog of deception makes it impossible to see the truth. The fog spreads. An orientation toward reality is lost. Theologian Edward Farley writes about the erosion of reality. Our systems of living are based on trust. When trust is eroded, people and systems come crashing down.

There was a video on the YouTube awhile back: a patch of road, a two lane rural state highway, the road gently dipping down between a couple of small hills, with a small stream running underneath through a culvert under the road. It was a concrete road. Solid. Thousands of cars had driven over this same spot for decades.

But there was a flash flood. The waters spilled over the road. The dip down made it look as if there was merely 6 or 8 inches of water on top of the road. But the waters underneath, in a matter of minutes, completely eroded the road.

You could not see it from the surface: one simply saw muddy water on top.

But the road was not there anymore. No one knew, until some car decided to drive through the water, and did a nosedive into the gaping hole beneath the surface.

Lies erode the daily roads we travel. We can only live because we trust in the truth that the road is there for us. Lies not only deceive what is on the surface of reality. Lies erode the foundation of the everyday reality upon which we depend to support us in our lives. When our lives are eroded by lies, eventually, we go crashing down. As Samuel Johnson put it long ago, “Even the devils do not lie to one another, because even Hell could not subsist without truth...”

As Sisella Bok writes:

“Imagine a society, no matter how ideal in other respects, where word and gesture could never be counted upon. Questions asked, answers given, information exchanged – all would be worthless. Were all statements randomly truthful or deceptive, action and choice would be undermined from the outset. There must be a minimal degree of trust in communication for language and action to be more than stabs in the dark. This is why some level of truthfulness has always been seen as essential to human society, no matter how deficient the observance of other moral principles.” (Bok, 19)

Bok takes a hard stance against lying in asserting that lying is a form of violence. Both violence and lying are forms of assault on human beings. Like violence, lying forces people to act against their will. Subtle though it may be, lying is a form of coercion. What does a lie do?

1. It leads the person astray.
2. Knowledge is power; a lie takes away one person's power.
3. A lie gives power by manipulation.
4. A lie keeps people from reaching their objectives.
5. A lie hides alternatives.
6. A lie can hide costs and benefits.
7. Lies camouflage and cover up, keeping people from free choice.

Many lies are trivial. The problem is, we have no way to tell when liars will restrict themselves to telling only trivial lies. So even trivial lies are problematic. While it may be only one person who is deceived, there may also be a ripple effect.

A lie does not get any more true just because someone say it enough times. It just undermines their integrity more, and erodes more of the reality upon which the public depends. Words matter, and have power even on those uttering them. People who repeat a lie often enough begin to believe their own lies.

Psychologists who study lying find that, when someone hears a lie, their brain has to consider it. So for a moment, the hearer becomes part of the lie. It takes effort to throw it off or cast it out. A lot of people do not want to take the effort. So they either take the easy way and believe it or they take the almost as easy way: and stop caring. In that way, lying is a recipe for nihilism.

The search for truth is not simple, but of course it is possible. To tell the truth begins with our believing in the dignity of the other person. This is something our faith teaches us from the first chapter in the Bible: as all human beings are created in the image of God, they deserve being treated with respect.

Most of us have experienced being the victim of someone else's indifference to our own reality. The liar seeks to reduce our mystery and complexity, and dominate through false reality. The beginning of truth has to do with opening ourselves to the mystery of the other, and seeking to develop relations with others.

The truth is fragile. King David is not portrayed as evil, but he ends up a murderer. It is a cautionary tale that people, and especially leaders, need to stick with the hard work of keeping their integrity – integrity within themselves, their social roles, and in relation to other people.

Farley says reality is dynamic. To be committed to the truth, we have to pay attention to the changing world. The truth has to do with discovering what in the world is going on as the world changes and develops over time. The incarnation of Jesus is about God becoming human, becoming real, being involved dynamically in the on-going creation. Since Jesus is still at work in the world through the Holy Spirit, then Jesus' followers need to develop a passion for the real, ready to discover what is true.

In religious life, we can develop a passion for the truth and God's revealed reality in important practices.

1. Churches need to examine important social issues, including controversial issues. They need to agree that they will talk openly about important things, and not shy away from conflict. They need to agree that even if they are in the minority on an issue, they will support the church and remain loyal in membership, attendance and financial support. It is the only way the church can truly discern and stand for the truth.
2. Churches need to have a disciplined approach to education. It is not enough to have the form of education. There must be disciplined teaching at all levels and ages.
3. Worship needs to deal with important life issues. Worship should not suppress reality, but examine and enhance real life.
4. Ministers need to not hide behind theological jargon, nor reduce the gospel to simplistic slogans. The gospel needs to be represented in dynamic, compelling, life-connected terms.
5. The gospel as practiced in the church needs not to be trivialized or avoided, but discerned and practiced among the whole of the congregation.

Christians and churches need to rededicate themselves to discerning and telling the truth. To standing up to the lies in the world around us, recognizing how they erode society itself. Lying and truth are not simply matters of individual morality. They are about the existence of human society. The truth is central to survival. King David's reign came crashing down around him when the lies kept reverberating in his world. His story is in the Bible to challenge us, with the prophet's words, "You are the man!" We need to take responsibility to confront the lies in ourselves, in our leaders, and we need to stand for the truth in our world. Remember, for us, faithfulness to Christ is embodied in those core goals of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Including the preservation of the truth.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was dedicated to fighting evil. The conclusion he came to was that, ultimately, the greatest antidote to evil is truth. As he wrote,

““Let your credo be this: ‘Let the lie come into the world, let it even triumph. But not through me.’ ”

Not through me. Not through us.