

## **12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

Exodus 20:16

"You shall not bear false witness."

John 8:32

"You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

In J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" book series, *The Order of the Phoenix*, Harry Potter is punished by Dolores Umbridge, a cruel, nasty, new professor at Hogwarts, who works for the Ministry of Magic, and secretly supports the Dark Lord, Voldemort. When Harry dares speak up, fact-checking in real-time, Professor Umbridge's false statement about Voldemort's presence, he is punished by her.

**You haven't given me any ink," he said.**

**"Oh, you won't need ink," said Professor Umbridge with the merest suggestion of a laugh in her voice.**

**Harry placed the point of the quill on the paper and wrote: "I must not tell lies."**

**He let out a gasp of pain. The words had appeared on the parchment in what appeared to be shining red ink. At the same time, the words had appeared on the back of Harry's right hand, cut into his skin as though traced there by a scalpel — yet even as he stared at the shining cut, the skin healed over again, leaving the place where it had been slightly redder than before but quite smooth.**

**Harry looked around at Umbridge. She was watching him, her wide, toad-like mouth stretched in a smile.**

**"Yes?" "He looked back at the parchment, placed the quill upon it once more, wrote I must not tell lies, and felt the searing pain on the back of his hand for a second time; once again, the words had been cut into his skin, once again they healed over seconds later. And on it went. Again and again Harry wrote the words on the parchment in what he soon came to realize was not ink, but his own blood. And again and again the words were cut into the back of his hand, healed, and then reappeared the next time he set quill to parchment."**

**"I must not tell a lie."** While those exact words were not burned into human skin, similar ones were said to be written in stone, by the very finger of God, when Moses received the Decalogue (10 Commandments) on Mt. Sinai. The 9th Commandment in Exodus 20:16 says: **"You Shall Not Bear False Witness."**

To "bear false witness": **"means: to speak falsely or utter untruth knowingly, as with intent to deceive. to express what is false; convey a false impression."**

In a court of law, witnesses giving testimony are sworn-in using these words: **“Do you solemnly (swear/affirm) that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, (so help you God/under pains and penalties of perjury)?”**

What does it mean to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

In his book, *Whistling in the Dark*, Fredrick Buechner says of Bearing False Witness (Truth-telling & Lying): **“THERE IS PERHAPS NOTHING that so marks us as human as the gift of speech. Who knows to what degree and in what ways animals have the power to communicate with each other, but to all appearances it is only a shadow of ours. By speaking, we can reveal the hiddenness of thought, we can express the subtlest as well as the most devastating of emotions, we can heal, we can make poems, we can pray. All of which is to say we can speak truth—the truth of what it is to be ourselves, to be with each other, to be in the world—and such speaking as that is close to what being human is all about. What makes lying an evil is not only that the world is deceived by it, but that we are dehumanized by it.”**

**“What makes lying an evil is not only that the world is deceived by it, but that we are dehumanized by it.”** That is a pretty powerful statement.

It echoes Fredrik Backman’s quote from his book, *Beartown*, which I shared last Sunday in my sermon on Hate verses Love: **“Hate is simple. So the first thing that happens in a conflict is that we choose a side, because that's easier than trying to hold two thoughts in our heads at the same time. The second thing that happens is that we seek out facts that confirm what we want to believe - comforting facts, ones that permit life to go on as normal. *The third is that we dehumanize our enemy.*”**

In the past four years, we in America have become more familiar with the word: “Gaslighting”. “It is a form of psychological manipulation in which a person or a group covertly sows seeds of doubt in a targeted individual or group, making them question their own memory, sanity, perception, or judgment, often evoking in them cognitive dissonance and other changes, in order to gain more power over their victim. “(Psychology Today)

In the 1944 film “Gaslight,” in which a woman becomes aware her husband is trying to drive her insane. More recently, The Chicks (formerly known as The Dixie Chicks), released an album and a song both titled “Gaslighter.” Over the past four years, Gaslighting, has been used to describe what Donald Trump and his administration have been attempting to do to the American people, manipulating the truth, bearing false witness, and out-right-lying, to gain power over his victims.

In his doing so, he makes us wonder, "What is the truth," so much so, that hate groups like White Supremacist and Neo-Nazis and conspiracy theories, like the newly mainstream one supported by Donald Trump - Q-anon, have all become mainstream "truth-tellers". At the same time, those who live into God's politics of compassion, love, justice, mercy, kindness, caring, openness, decency, inclusivity, respect, responsibility for others even the most vulnerable in our world, and honesty, are the ones who are lying.

In the Presbyterian Church's Brief Statement of Faith, we acknowledge this twisted manipulation known as Gaslighting with these four words:  
**"Accept lies as truth."**

"You shall not bear false witness", right? Yet, here we are in 2020, still struggling to tell the truth to ourselves, to others, to God. Maybe we as people created in God's sacred image, always have been prone to do so, both in our own faith and in our relationships?

In 2018, a respected group of Faith Leaders from across theological perspectives wrote "The Reclaiming Jesus: A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis" In their powerful statement of faith, they address truth-telling and lying with these words:

**WE BELIEVE that truth is morally central to our personal and public lives. Truth-telling is central to the prophetic biblical tradition, whose vocation includes speaking the Word of God into their societies and speaking the truth to power. A commitment to speaking truth, the ninth commandment of the Decalogue, "You shall not bear false witness" (Exodus 20:16), is foundational to shared trust in society. Falsehood can enslave us, but Jesus promises, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:32). The search and respect for truth is crucial to anyone who follows Christ.**

**THEREFORE, WE REJECT the practice and pattern of lying that is invading our political and civil life. Politicians, like the rest of us, are human, fallible, sinful, and mortal. But when public lying becomes so persistent that it deliberately tries to change facts for ideological, political, or personal gain, the public accountability to truth is undermined. The regular purveying of falsehoods and consistent lying by the nation's highest leaders can change the moral expectations within a culture, the accountability for a civil society, and even the behavior of families and children. The normalization of lying presents a profound moral danger to the fabric of society. In the face of lies that bring darkness, Jesus is our truth and our light.**

Listen again to those last words: **"The normalization of lying presents a profound moral danger to the fabric of our society. In the face of lies that brings darkness, Jesus is our truth and our light."**

Beloved of God, the search and respect for truth is crucial to anyone who professes to follow Christ. The normalization of lying does present us as individuals, as a nation and as global community with a profound moral danger to the very fabric of our society and in faith communities!

It is time, we, the Beloved children of our Creator, begin to speak "the honest-to-God-truth to power, so that we might be the repairs of the breach and bearers of hope and healing, shedding God's love and light for all to finally see what is true. And that my friends, is no lie!

Amen.