

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Tenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**August 17, 2025**  
**9:30 AM**

Text: Exodus 20:16 & Matthew 26:57-63

Theme: Words of Life: Honesty: You Must Not Give False Witness

[prayer]

On June 28, 1984, a man named Darryl Burton was arrested and charged with shooting and killing a man outside a convenience store in St. Louis. Darryl was eventually convicted of murder. But his conviction was not based on the things you would expect a prosecutor to use to build a murder case. As Darryl recalled,

“There was no motive, no fingerprint, no weapon, no DNA evidence, no confession, or any evidence connecting me to the crime. The only thing that connected me to the case were two lying eyewitnesses’ snitch testimonies. These two men testified falsely against me because they were making deals with the police and prosecution to have their serious criminal charges they were facing dropped.”<sup>1</sup>

Darryl was sentenced to seventy-five years in prison. He served twenty-four of those years before he was exonerated in 2008. He is now one of the pastors at the Church of the Resurrection, the largest United Methodist church in the United States.<sup>2</sup> He also started an organization, Miracle of Innocence, that works to set the innocent free and care for them once they come home.<sup>3</sup>

I wish we could say Darryl’s story is unusual. The exact percentage of wrongful convictions in our country is unknown, but experts estimate it is between four and six percent.<sup>4</sup> That may seem like a small percentage, but 1.8 million people are

---

<sup>1</sup> Quote shared by Adam Hamilton in *Words of Life: Jesus and the Promise of the Ten Commandments Today* (New York: Convergent Books, 2020), 175-176.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.darrylburton.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.miracleofinnocence.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://innocenceproject.org/research-resources/>

currently incarcerated in our country.<sup>5</sup> That means somewhere between 72,000 and 108,000 people may be locked up for crimes they did not commit.

The ninth commandment is typically read as a prohibition against lying. Leviticus 19:11-12 restates the command thus, “You must not steal nor deceive nor lie to each other. You must not swear falsely by my name, desecrating your God’s name in doing so; I am Yahweh” (CEB). In its essence, the ninth commandment says *Do not lie*.

But the context of this command is judicial – the fair, impartial application of justice in a courtroom. In the Torah, the punishment for breaking the Decalogue is severe, often the death penalty. A judge needed to be sure of the evidence before sentencing someone to death. And evidence in the ancient world was typically eyewitness testimony; there were few other forms of corroboration.

Hence the command against bearing false witness. Deuteronomy 17:6 requires more than one witness to testify to invoke capital punishment. This was supposed to be a safeguard against false convictions. Those who testified were also required to administer the punishment. Capital punishment was usually done by stoning, meaning witnesses would stand on a platform and drop the first heavy stones onto the condemned person’s head or torso. Requiring witnesses to participate in the execution was supposed to deter them from giving false testimony.

But a criminal justice system is only as good as the integrity of the people who make it up. As in the case of Darryl Burton, people can be convinced to testify falsely if they believe they have something to gain. We call this perjury, and it can ruin people’s lives.

Justice requires truth telling. More than that, a viable human community *depends* on truth telling. It depends on members of that community having confidence in and accepting the same social reality. Lying undermines that confidence. It distorts reality out of self-interest. Relationships are built on trust and trust requires honesty. The commandment against lying is about not undermining your relationship with your neighbor. It is about not deceiving your neighbor to enhance your self-interest.

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2025.htm>

This commandment is publicly broken daily in our country. A big reason we have become so politically polarized is because Americans no longer even agree on basic facts. We choose news sources that align with our political ideology and confirm our biases instead of reading and listening broadly across sources. We dismiss criticism of our preferred political party as “fake news.” Politicians on both sides of the aisle leverage disinformation and propaganda to twist the truth and manipulate voters. Social media has become a powerful tool for spreading disinformation. And the traditional arbiters of truth – journalists, judges, scientists, and public institutions – have come under attack. We no longer trust them. We no longer trust each other. This lack of trust is at the root of our unraveling social compact as Americans.

I am not sure how we get ourselves out of this trust deficit. But I am clear that followers of Jesus should be part of the solution, not the problem. No matter how righteous we think our side is, we must resist the temptation to bear false witness in our political discussions. We must commit ourselves to listening to and understanding the political ‘other’ so we can make sure we are representing their views accurately. This requires actually engaging the political other. If you are a Democrat and you haven’t had a conversation with a Republican lately, it’s time to seek one out. If you are a Republican who keeps calling your Democrat neighbor a “woke lib,” have the humility to try and understand their viewpoint. And if you listen to media sources on either side that use dehumanizing and condescending language to describe the political other, I urge you to evaluate whether your media consumption is increasing your love of neighbor or just reinforcing your prejudices.

Sharing something on social media that you have not verified as factual is breaking the ninth commandment. Forwarding chain emails that you have not verified as factual is breaking the ninth commandment. Making false statements and hateful threats against someone you dislike or disagree with is breaking the ninth commandment.

Rev. Adam Hamilton writes this, and I think he is spot on: “I’ve wondered if politics might not be the true test of our character and faith. Can we practice politics while seeking always to tell the truth? Do we express love in the way we live out our political convictions? [Especially toward our political enemies?] Are the fruits

of the Spirit evident in our conversations and interactions with people whom we disagree with?”<sup>6</sup>

I think the temptation to bear false witness against our neighbor – to misrepresent, malign, badmouth, slander, gossip, to sow doubt and distrust - is ultimately rooted in the temptation to bear false witness against *ourselves*. When we speak from a place of arrogance, thinking of ourselves as better than another person, we are lying to ourselves. The temptation to gossip, especially, can make us feel empowered and morally superior.

But the opposite is also true. When we speak from a place of insecurity, thinking of ourselves as less than another person, we are also lying to ourselves. We tear down the image of God within us. We ignore the great sacrifice that Christ made on the cross when he gave his very life as a testament to our enduring worth and value in His eyes.

We must have the humble joy to see ourselves as God sees us: Sinners redeemed by His grace. That grace sets us free to be honest – honest about our worth as human beings made in God’s image, and honest about how sin dims and distorts that image. Grace empowers us to confront sin head on – both the social sin that exists in our world, but also the personal sin that exists inside us.

When I preached last month on the third commandment – *Do not take the LORD’s name in vain* – I reminded us that God established the creative power of the spoken word. Words have the power to bless, to encourage, to build up. But they also have the power to curse, to harm, to tear down. Once again James puts it bluntly when he writes to the church, “The tongue is a small flame of fire, a world of evil at work in us. It contaminates our entire lives...People can tame and already have tamed every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and fish. No one can tame the tongue, though. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God’s likeness. Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn’t be this way!” (James 3:6-10) James’s words apply to keyboard warriors, too.

Honest speech is part of our witness as followers of Jesus Christ. James also writes, “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein

---

<sup>6</sup> *Words of Life* 182.

on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless” (James 1:26, NIV) How often have you heard Christians and the Church called hypocrites? A hypocrite is someone who speaks one way but acts another. We can lie with our mouths. But we can also lie with our actions. Our integrity as Christians is a sacred trust God has given us, and we squander it at our peril.

At the very center of our faith is a man who was convicted and put to death on the testimony of false witnesses. When Jesus said he would tear down the Temple and rebuild it in three days, he was prophesying his death and resurrection. But false witnesses intentionally misconstrued his words as blasphemy. Even his disciples were convinced it was in their self-interest to lie and say they never knew him. These lies led to Jesus’s execution on the cross.

And yet, Jesus was mostly silent in the face of his accusers. Jesus knew that it was his actions, including the action of willingly laying down his life, that would testify most strongly to the truth of the message he came to bring. When questioned by Pilate, Jesus said, “I was born and came into the world for this reason: to testify to the truth. Whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice” (John 20:37 CEB). Which is to say, whoever *acts* as Jesus did is listening to His voice.

A disciple of Jesus declares that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). We believe Jesus is the truth because Jesus shows us what a truthful life looks like. Jesus shows us how to live an honest life that loves God, loves our neighbor, and loves ourselves. Most lying is prompted by fear and self-preservation. But we do not need to lie to ourselves or to our neighbor when our worth and identity is found in Christ. In Christ we have the freedom to live honest lives in the light of God.

Amen.