

"Started With a Whisper,"

30 January 2005

Bible passages:

Exodus 20: 15 (*The Message*)

"No lies about your neighbor."

Proverbs 4:24 (*The Message*)

"Don't talk out of both sides of your mouth; avoid careless banter, white lies, and gossip."

Proverbs 19:9 (*The Message*)

"The person who tells lies gets caught; the person who spreads rumors is ruined."

Ephesians 4:25 (*The Message*)

"Tell your neighbor the truth. In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself."

Rumors, gossip, lies—that's what we're talking about this morning. Actually, this idea was suggested by one of you, and it was offered without explanation. The suggestion was to have the topic of rumors, gossip, and lies as a Sunday theme. There's no way to know exactly why this was suggested. Perhaps it was because the person whose idea it was has been hurt by those things. Or perhaps it was because the person has realized that this is one of his or her faults. We don't know, and it really doesn't matter.

The topic is really a good one, because it appears to affect all of us in one way or another. In preparation for today, I did what I've become accustomed to doing of late, and that's going on Google to find some research and conversations about any given topic. That's what I did for today, and I was overwhelmed with what I found. When I wrote in the word "gossip," I found that there were 9,770,000 items found. "Rumor" turned up 11,100,000 references, and "lying" won the award with 14,100,000 items found. This is apparently a major issue.

Let's be clear on our terms when we refer to rumors, gossip and lies. The dictionary defines a rumor as "a piece of unverified information of uncertain origin usually spread by word of mouth." Gossip is defined as "talk of a personal, sensational or intimate nature." The first definition of the word "lie" is that it is "a false statement deliberately presented as being true, a falsehood." In addition, we find that it can also be "something meant to deceive or give a wrong impression."

Given those definitions of gossip, rumor and lie, I doubt that any of us, when we look at ourselves honestly, would fall outside the parameters of those who gossip, spread rumors, or tell lies. I would guess that virtually all of us are guilty, on one level or another, of lying, or sharing a bit of juicy gossip about a friend or co-worker. We've probably all engaged in a little bit of listening to or contributing to the rumor mill. It just seems to be an inevitable part of who we are as human beings.

We certainly know of people who have gotten into certain positions by lying on their resumes. After doing 3.8 million background checks, Automatic Data Processing Inc. announced last April

that 52% of job applicants had lied on their resumes. Many of us know folks who fudge on income tax reporting, and we're aware that we often tell our kids to inform telemarketers that we're not home when we are.

We read that cheating, which is in essence lying, is rampant in our schools. In fact, a 2002 survey of 12,000 student respondents, 74% said that they had cheated on an exam at least once in the last year. Apparently, the latest craze seems to be using cellular phones to photograph exams, and pass that information along to students in later classes. What an incredible amount of time and energy is spent trying to short circuit the learning process!

We talked about this whole issue of lying a bit at worship team one night, and one team member talked about the lies he told as a teenager to prevent his parents from learning what he was really doing. He'd lie about where he was and who he was with, and he discovered that he had to compound his lies to keep things away from his folks. He said it got to be very hard to keep track of what he'd said to this person or to that one. He discovered that if you tell one lie, you wind up having to tell more lies. It's just keeps escalating.

On the other hand, I suspect many of us have been the subject of a rumor or of a bit of gossip or we may even have had lies told about us. We know how hurtful that can be. Oprah Winfrey certainly does. In an article in her magazine O, she shared how it felt early in her career when tabloids were writing many untruthful things about her. She said that she was devastated, and felt totally misunderstood. She admitted that she had spent a lot of energy worrying about whether people believed the falsehoods, or not; she even considered calling those who had maligned her and defending herself.

Oprah went on to say that all that occurred before she understood what she now understands. She said, "When someone spreads lies about you, you're not in it. Never. Gossip...reflects the insecurity of those who initiate it." She went on to say how gossiping or spreading lies really reflects on the person who's lying, and tells anyone who listens that this person is not trustworthy. Gossip and lies are called "little murders" by playwright Jules Feiffer. Oprah said, "In short, gossip is an assassination attempt by a coward." Strong words, but I think she's right.

That's really what our Bible passages for today are saying to us. It doesn't take much explanation or interpretation for us to figure them out. One of the Ten Commandments, in our version, says, "No lies about your neighbor." The two proverbs are also quite clear: "Don't talk out of both sides of your mouth; avoid careless banter, white lies, and gossip," says one. The other goes this way: "The person who tells lies gets caught; the person who spreads rumors is ruined."

It's very clear that lying, gossiping, spreading rumors are not endorsed as positive, life-giving ways to relate to one another. They destroy relationships; they erode our sense of self-worth; they move us away from the high road in terms of our personal moral conduct. That's the message of our faith.

However, the problem is that this faith message seems to be running counter to the understandings of our world today. In fact, there are many Americans who are convinced that if we play by those rules, we will lose out. Diane Swanson, professor of professional ethics at Kansas State University, said, "It is now more lucrative to lie. People must know there is a risk, but the payoff is potentially enormous." The payoff is enormous, we must admit, if we're talking about wealth, power, or political gain. One writer summarized this dilemma with these words: "Many seem to know right from wrong, but material success has become more important to them than the task of sculpting moral character."

That's really the heart of the matter, isn't it? When we engage in gossip, rumors and lies, we are really chipping away at our own moral fiber. Somehow we get to the point of thinking that it's OK to lie, because we see it all around us. It's what we all have to do to survive. We have to lie on our resume, or exaggerate our skill level to get the job, or we won't make it. To me, it's a sad day when we see the level of dishonesty that exists in our government, in our corporations, in the media, in our schools, in our homes, and even in our churches and religious organizations.

The cost of damaged moral character and fiber is high, and most of it cannot be reclaimed. That was the case with a man named Richard Scrushy, former CEO of HealthSouth Corporation, who was indicted on 85 counts of fraud. Just after that happened, a graffiti artist scrawled the word "thief" across his statue in Birmingham, Alabama. Certainly, public disgrace is one of the high prices paid.

There are painful ramifications of our little white lies and minor indiscretions when it comes to spreading rumors or sharing in gossip. It's like a fable about a wise man whose reputation was severely affected by a falsehood that had been told about him. One of the people responsible for spreading the story about the wise man later came to regret his part in deception, so he went to the wise man and asked for his forgiveness. He told him he would do anything to try to make it right. The wise man told him to take a pillow to a steep cliff overlooking the countryside, rip open the pillow and spread the feathers in the wind, and then return to see him. The guilty man did exactly that. He then went back to the wise man, and reported what he had done. "Good." said the wise man, "Now go collect every feather." That was impossible to do, and was the wise man's way of demonstrating the irretrievable consequences of spreading rumors, gossip and falsehoods.

Well, what are we to do with the moral dilemma in which we often find ourselves? How do we keep from inflicting pain on others and suffering the irretrievable consequences of our rumors and lies?

*Dr. Diane Komp, a Yale pediatric oncologist, may be helpful to us. She wrote a book a few years ago that was entitled, *The Anatomy of a Lie: The Truth About Lies and Why Good People Tell Them.*" She is not a professional ethicist, and wasn't trying to point fingers at anyone. Instead, she wrote the book for the average person like you and me. She wrote it as a way to cause each of us to think about the issue. She started out by trying to determine whether or not there are times when there are good reasons for lying, and while she was looking at other people's dishonesty, the Yale physician kept track of her own "white lies" in a journal.*

I think that she came out with some interesting observations. One thing she noted was that most of us tend to condemn dishonesty in our political leaders, police officers, doctors and others in whom we expect to trust, but we pay little attention to the impact of our own falsehoods. She said, "I began to wonder about the possibility that my own seemingly harmless white lies had an impact on the world, that maybe, instead of there being a trickle-down effect when people in exalted positions or in public life lie, there is a trickle-up effect." Her contention is that the trivial lies that most of us tell really do matter.

That's an important thing for us to think about. Our words do matter, and they matter even more if we think that what each of us says has a trickle-up effect on the rest of the world. Hopefully, because we want to think of ourselves as people of faith, we want that trickle-up effect to be positive and life-giving.

In one of our Bible passages, the one that is one of the Ten Commandments, we're told "No lies about your neighbor." It's not just a rule that we're to obey; it's offered because it is trying to encourage us to take the high road always, to take the faithful path. God knows and understands

us, and knows what many of us have yet to learn—that honesty is freeing and empowering.

Mary Baker Eddy once said, "Honesty is spiritual power." I think she was absolutely right. You see, telling the truth isn't so much about avoiding the unpleasant repercussions of getting caught in our lies, or even about being a virtuous person. Being honest is a way of reminding ourselves of our connection with God. If we refrain from lying and spreading rumors and gossip, we are staying true to our very nature as children of God. We are loved by God, created by God; we're made in the image of God, and being truthful and honest is living in tune with the way God has created us. God wants us to be our best selves, and God is always with us to help us take the high road.

CLOSING:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that each one of us asks God to help us be persons of honesty, to be the child God has created us to be.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.