

The Ninth Commandment

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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1 Kings 21:1-16 NRSV

Later the following events took place: Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. And Ahab said to Naboth, "Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money." But Naboth said to Ahab, "The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance." Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, "I will not give you my ancestral inheritance." He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.

His wife Jezebel came to him and said, "Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?" He said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, 'Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard for it'; but he answered, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" His wife Jezebel said to him, "Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city. She wrote in the letters, "Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, 'You have cursed God and the king.' Then take him out, and stone him to death."

The men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. Just as it was written in the letters that she had sent to them, they proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the assembly. The two scoundrels came in and sat opposite him; and the scoundrels brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, "Naboth cursed God and the king." So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death.

Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, "Naboth has been stoned; he is dead." As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, "Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead." As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

Acts 6:8-15; 7:58a,59-60 NRSV

Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.

Then they secretly instigated some men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council.

They set up false witnesses who said, "This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us." And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him . . . While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

Children's Story

The big window on the front of Ms. Hawthorne's house was broken, and McKenzie Huberschmidt was in big trouble. "McKenzie did it! We saw him." That's what Billy and Amy Thornton told Ms. Hawthorne. And that's why McKenzie Huberschmidt was in such big trouble. It made sense. Everyone knew how McKenzie loved to play baseball. And Ms. Hawthorne had found a baseball among the pieces of broken glass on her living room floor. She told McKenzie's mom and dad all about it. About the window. About the baseball. About what Bill and Amy Thornton had seen. "That child of yours is a menace!" Ms. Hawthorne said.

Mr. and Mrs. Huberschmidt were disappointed that McKenzie had not told them about breaking the window. They were even more disappointed when McKenzie denied doing it. Of course he had done it! Bill and Amy Thornton were there. They saw everything. They saw McKenzie do it! That's what they told Ms. Hawthorne. But Bill and Amy Thornton were lying! And because of their lie, McKenzie Huberschmidt was in big trouble.

Sermon

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). That's the Ninth Commandment. We usually connect the Ninth Commandment with lying. But it's not about lying *per se*. Lying, of course, is usually wrong and bad, though sometimes it is necessary and good. Think of Moses lying to Pharaoh: "Pharaoh, just give us a long weekend. We'll go off to worship the LORD on Friday. Monday morning we'll be back to work. Honest!" (cp. Exodus 5:3). Or think about people under Nazi occupation, hiding Jews in their attics or their root cellars, never once telling the truth about it. Exceptional circumstances, of course. And so, it remains the case that lying is usually wrong and bad. Lying is not a habit any of us should get into.

But the Ninth Commandment is not about lying *per se*. It's about a particular kind of lying, lying that gets other people into trouble, serious trouble.

Take the story of Naboth and his vineyard. We meet Naboth only briefly, but we do get a sense of the man. Naboth was a man to whom roots mattered, most obviously the rootstock of his vineyard. You can picture him and his vines. The vines run in long, straight rows. Naboth has carefully pruned them, ever concerned about their yield and their health. And now Naboth stands, hoe in hand, patiently weeding and cultivating, ensuring that his vines derive maximum benefit from the rich soil of Jezreel.

But Naboth cared about more than his rootstock. His family had roots as well. For generations already, the Valley of Jezreel had been their home. When the land was divided, his fathers had received from the LORD's hand the ground on which Naboth stood. That land was their heritage, never to be wasted, never to be forsaken, a lasting gift from God. Naboth, again, was a man to whom roots mattered.

There was Jezebel, a woman to whom Naboth's roots mattered not at all. Her husband, King Ahab, wanted Naboth's land. It was conveniently located and would make a good vegetable garden. (Picture Ahab as Tolkien's and Peter Jackson's Denethor, crudely biting into a fresh tomato, the seeds and juices running down his chin.) When Naboth refused an offer from Ahab, an offer for his family inheritance, when Ahab himself took to sulking, Jezebel quickly formulated a plan. She hatched a conspiracy, taking into her confidence both leading citizens and scoundrels from Naboth's town. The plan unfolded flawlessly. People gathered for a fast. Naboth was framed by false accusations from those scoundrels. He was executed by his neighbors just outside the town. And Ahab had himself a vegetable garden.

What Jezebel and her co-conspirators did? That's what the Ninth Commandment forbids. The kind of lying that gets other people into trouble, serious trouble. The kind of lying that cost Naboth his life and his family its inheritance.

In a similar vein, take the story of Stephen. Stephen, too, we meet only briefly, but we do get a sense of the man. Stephen was a man full of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit. By that Spirit, Stephen was a man of deep faith and of wisdom. His wisdom outsmarted his adversaries. His faith sustained him through the

experience of martyrdom, leading him in the imitation of the Christ he loved, as he gave a clear testimony to the Gospel, committed his spirit to God, and prayed for the forgiveness of his killers.

How did Stephen come that point? It was his adversaries. You see, the Gospel was gaining traction. On the day of Pentecost, thousands put faith in Jesus as Messiah. As time went on, the number of disciples grew and grew. Even a good number of priests put their faith in Jesus. Leading this Gospel charge was Stephen. He was “full of grace and power.” He did “great wonders and signs” for all to see (Acts 6:8). He had to be stopped. So a plan was hatched, a conspiracy launched. False accusations, false testimony, and a sentence of death.

What Stephen’s adversaries and their co-conspirators did? That’s what the Ninth Commandment forbids. The kind of lying that gets people into trouble, serious trouble. The kind of lying that cost Stephen his life and the kingdom of God a powerful witness.

But there’s more to the Ninth Commandment than making false accusations or plotting with others to do so. **Recent headlines have highlighted a different sort of violation of the Ninth Commandment, the violation seen in the case of Shirley Sherrod.**

The general outline of the story runs like this. Ms. Sherrod was, until recently, a USDA official in rural Georgia. In March, she made a speech at an NAACP banquet in Georgia. A couple of weeks ago, video clips from that speech were posted on-line. Those clips made Ms. Sherrod sound like a racist — or like an anti-white, “reverse racist” (Ms. Sherrod is black). In short order, Ms. Sherrod was by fired by the USDA, whose secretary, Tom Vilsack, declared zero-tolerance for discrimination. Ms. Sherrod was also condemned by the NAACP.

Now, it appears, Ms. Sherrod has been offered her job back. Why? Because the USDA decided to look at the whole speech, not just clips. And the whole speech told a different story. Ms. Sherrod is no racist. The NAACP has, likewise, gotten the whole story and issued an apology to Ms. Sherrod.

The Ninth Commandment, of course, condemns lies aimed at causing someone else trouble. The same would go for half-truths and for distortions. So anyone who posted video clips designed to mislead has something to answer for. But our Heidelberg Catechism captures another important element of the Ninth Commandment, an element that surely applies in the case of Ms. Sherrod. Listen to Lord’s Day 43:

God’s will is that I . . .
[not] join in condemning anyone
without a hearing or without a just cause.

Ms. Sherrod, however, was condemned again and again by people who gave her no hearing. The BBC put it this way: “[Ms. Sherrod] was apparently ruthlessly dumped by people who hadn’t bothered to view her entire speech, ask for a transcript, or even ask for her point of view.” That is, without a doubt, a violation of the Ninth Commandment.

The big news lately has been the plume of oil spreading in the Gulf of Mexico. Waters there are being fouled by toxins. Stop the flow, and the fallout remains extensive, the damage hard to calculate.

In a similar way, our public discourse has been fouled. The toxins of lies and misrepresentations, of distortions and half-truths, have poisoned the environment. Casualties are everywhere. You and I, however, are not to join in this ugliness, whether goaded by talking heads or tattling bloggers. You and I are called to something different, something better. Our Catechism puts it very well:

God’s will is that I
never give false testimony against anyone,
twist no one’s words,
not gossip or slander,
nor join in condemning anyone
without a hearing or without a just cause.

Rather, in court and everywhere else,
I should avoid lying and deceit of every kind;

these are devices the devil himself uses,
and they would call down on me God's intense anger.
I should love the truth,
speak it candidly,
and openly acknowledge it.
And I should do what I can
to guard and advance my neighbor's good name.

If we do this, we are keeping the Ninth Commandment. If we do this, we are at least diluting some of the poison and clearing some space for the kingdom of God to take root. And as servants of God, that is our calling.