

“Those Lyin’ Hearts”
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This is cherry pie season, and cherry pies remind me of the famous story about George Washington. As a child, you will recall, he was given a present of a hatchet and, enthused, he chopped down an English cherry tree in the garden. When the vandalism was discovered, he confessed by saying, “I can not tell a lie, father. I chopped down the tree with my little hatchet.”

For reasons that escape me, this story has been held up for over a century as an example of Washington’s noble character, and all presidents since have been held to its impossible standard – presidents can’t lie.

First appearing in an 1800 biography of Washington written by a parson, Mason Locke Weems, this famous story vividly describes an event that would have occurred in 1741. Published after Washington’s death, the story has never been verified and is considered by many scholars to be itself a total fabrication.

Fabrications, deceptions, and secrets are often featured in the news, lately with a frequency not seen since Watergate. As leaders in a wide variety of professions “spin” their versions of the reality, truth seems to have morphed into a fluid and uncontainable commodity.

The media help blur the blurry. TV shows marketed as depicting “reality” turn out to be scripted. Bestselling authors of racy autobiographies turn out to have invented their pasts out of whole cloth. Truth risks becoming relative, or worse yet, meaningless.

This is not new: truth has been considered relative since at least the third century B.C. E.. The Greek Skeptic philosopher Pyrrho “denied that anything could be known

and concluded that nothing could therefore be said to be honorable or dishonorable, just or unfair.” (Bok, 9)

We all would like to make truth relative at times—relative to our need to avoid or evade some aspect of it.

How many of us have ever been told a lie?

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We just indulged in a bit of public confession – very un-UU, but we might as well go all the way and consider ourselves absolved.

According to both Carl Cannon, a White House journalist, and Sissela Bok, a philosopher and professor, human beings lie, so we should consider ourselves normal. We can all be liars and we can all be, as Bok puts it, dupes.

If you are like me, right about now you are itching to explain yourself, your reasons and your justifications for those lies you have told—and this desire is common, too, except among pathological liars. The justification of lies has as long a history as lying does.

For as long as people have lied, there have been two basic schools of thought about lying: no lie is acceptable; and the other school -- some lies are more acceptable than others. Some have even considered some lies to be beneficial—the lie a doctor tells a patient believing that the truth would worsen his or her condition, for instance.

Another example of the type of lie some see as beneficial, or at least harmless: a woman is caught in conversation by a person from the fringe of a social circle she travels in. “Have you seen X lately?” she is asked. In split seconds she thinks, “If I say yes she may ask me when and where. I did talk with X, in fact, at a dinner party last Saturday evening to which our fringe friend was not invited.”

She doesn’t want to hurt the questioner’s feelings, so she lies: “No, not recently.” Making a mental reservation that “recently” means the last forty-eight hours, she feels okay about telling what is so common that it has a name—a white, or social, lie.

We sometimes lie to avoid potentially doing harm.

There is a trap, though, in thinking such lies are harmless. If the questioner later learns that the woman she spoke to had met recently, she will be doubly hurt—hurt at being left out and hurt at being lied to.

Any former trust will be shattered.

For this reason, all lying is sometimes considered bad. Our morning’s reading describes a subtle, long- unfolding lie. Robert Fulghum records the story of a man (understandably anonymous) who lies to his wife. He accidentally gets hit upside the head in the course of living out his lie. Knocking himself unconscious and forgetting his illicit rendezvous, he hurts the woman he was deceiving his wife to meet. Did he lie to himself along the way? We don’t know. But we can ask, “What did he stand to gain by lying? And what did he lose through his deception?”

He lost his ratty old underwear, he lost his dignity, and he lost his integrity. Through sheer luck, he did not lose his wife. (Who knows, maybe that’s what he subconsciously wanted.) Ignorant, she apparently still trusts him.

We sometimes lie to get what we want without paying the cost.

Finally, some would argue, the most serious kinds of lies do both emotional and physical harm. A recent example is the sad story of astronaut and Navy Captain Lisa Nowak, who attacked, perhaps with the intent to kill, a woman she thought was a rival for the affections of Navy Commander William Oefelein. One of the few chosen to fly on the Space Shuttle to the International Space Station, Nowak was considered a highly trained professional. Highly regarded, she was between missions. She is the mother of a girl, Katrina, and recently separated from her husband.

She drove 950 miles, equipped with a steel mallet, folding knife, rubber tube and pepper spray. Using fake names and disguises she met her rival, Air Force Captain Colleen Shipman's, plane and tried to enter her car as she left the airport. Luckily, she did not get a chance to use any of the tools she brought with her, except the spray. She claims, through her lawyer, that she only wanted to talk with Colleen.

What was she planning, setting out in a premeditated manner: to maim or kill another woman? She lost her freedom, a great job, and very likely custody of her child. Who will trust her in the future? Will she be able to trust herself?

Sometimes we lie to get something we think we deserve.

Lying to avoid telling a hurtful truth, to avoid consequences, or to get something we believe we deserve. We can find lots of good, but usually selfish reasons for why we do not tell the truth. We often cite our very good intentions, particularly when telling those harmless lies, the white ones. But we must be very careful not to delude ourselves: we rarely lie altruistically— we most often lie to protect our own interests.

Ironically, we insist that others tell the truth. Bok, in her book Lying, Moral Choice in Public Life and Private Life, says, we are “more hospitable to doubts about the possibility of moral choice when it comes to our own decisions” than to those of others. (Bok, 10)

Being truth tellers generally signals that we are looking out for interests beyond our own. Being a truth teller signals to others that we are worthy of their trust, loyalty, and affection.

Speaking of looking out for the interest of others, let's return to presidents. Presidents command our respect because they wield power. They are given that power to serve our collective best interests, and we rely on them to do so with as much justice, courage and integrity as is humanly possible. In hopes of this kind of leadership, we give them our trust and, when they succeed, our affection.

The journalist Carl Cannon, however, outlines a history of lies told by presidents, including the cover-up of the severity of FDR's illness, a fabrication of his war service by Ronald Reagan, and so on. All presidents, he concludes, have lied. As we have seen, there are beneficial lies, such as those told about plans for D-Day in the heat of World War Two; however, and there are also harmful lies. The worst lies of presidents, he concludes, are those the president tells him or herself, lies which serve to protect not our nation's interests, but the president's ego, reputation, power, powerful friends, and so on.

Bok, writes that “The role that one assigns to truthfulness will always remain central in considering what kind of person one wants to be – how one wishes to treat, not only other people, but oneself.” (Bok, Lying, p. xix)

Nations, like people, must take truth seriously, must be mindful that truth is essential to their integrity. Without truth, there is no trust, and without trust, there is no reaching out to others beyond our own self-interest. If we don't strive to be more than self-preserving, we can not be a force for peace in the world. Since we are the most powerful nation in the world, not to be a force for peace is a shame on our heads. Our nation was founded on the principle that there are inviolable truths about the way people should treat one another: "We hold these truths to be self-evident..." our Bill of Rights begins.

There is no where to run, no where to hide any more from this truth—we are responsible for the kind of people, and the kind of nation, we want to be.

Blessed be and amen.

Materials consulted in writing this sermon:

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