

*Sermon for the Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 16.x.2005, 10:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Chanceford Twp., York Co., Pennsylvania
WOV Service of Word & Prayer
Isaiah 45:1-7; Psalm 96:1-9; I Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22*

J. J.!

Grace to you and peace, from Him Who is and Who was and
Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

*“But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why are you
putting me to the test, you hypocrites?’”*

—Matthew 22:14



Two groups who had absolutely no time for each other, the Pharisees and the Herodians, combine forces to set a trap for Jesus. The Pharisees represent a holiness movement committed to the religious renewal of the Jewish people through strict observance of the ritual and ethical Commandments of God. The Herodians represent those Jews who had reached an accommodation with the Roman occupiers. Their puppet

regime was corrupt, but they were survivors. Neither group likes what Jesus teaches—holiness based on forgiveness—and both groups feel threatened that He has inherited most of the members of John the Baptist’s mass following. Jesus is, at that moment in history, more powerful than the Pharisees and the Herodians put together. They want to get rid of Jesus. They want Jesus to be seen and heard in public teaching His disciples and the people to withhold taxes the Roman Emperor, fomenting rebellion, committing an act of insurrection.

It would have taken no genius to know what these two groups were up to. In what some consider to be a ‘typically Jewish’ response, Jesus answers their question with *His* own question. Some find this irritating, but I think it is brilliant. Each coin of the Empire bore the image of the reigning Emperor and the inscription, DIVI FILIVS, ‘Son of God.’ If they gave the Emperor everything bearing his name and title, then they would

empty their pockets, making it too expensive for them to continue the argument with Jesus.

But, *should* Our Lord have been 'aware of their malice,' as Matthew tells us He was? Is that not presumption on His part, a prejudiced attitude toward His fellow man? Is that awareness of their very definite malice aforethought not putting the *worst* rather than the *best* construction on the neighbor's actions, as the Catechism warns us against. Does Our Lord not pretend to read their minds?

No, He is not *pretending* at all. Jesus does not *pretend* to read the minds of the professionally pious and the politically ruthless. Our Lord Jesus Christ *does* read their minds, both as the true DIVI FILIVS, the Son of God Who is worshipped around the world today, long after that world has forgotten the names of the Emperors of Rome, *and* as true Man, Mary's Son, a completely honest and good human being Who is acutely aware that He is in the presence of evil and in danger from that malice

that would destroy Him! Jesus Christ, true God and true Man, shows what it means to live the truth by withholding the truth from evil.

All of us have an intuitive sense of what this means, but we prefer not to talk about it. That is because, whether we know it or not, our minds, especially our *Protestant* minds have been deeply influenced by a Lutheran university professor who lived and taught over two centuries ago. He was a Lutheran, he was a German and he was a very disciplined and very precise *Prussian*. Immanuel Kant was interested in how we know what we know, and especially in how we know right from wrong, truth from falsehood. He came up with a rule of thumb that seems to make sense. Indeed, it *does* make sense. Kant's idea was that that is wrong which would be wrong were *all* people to do it all the time, and that is right which would be right were all people to do *it* all the time.

I think that has been pretty well drummed into all of us, especially by schoolteachers, and it has kept most of us in line most of the time for the last couple of centuries, during peacetime at least. Kant's theory works like clockwork, and it is provable. Just look at God's Ten Commandments and apply Kant's test. It works! If everyone were to obey all the Commandments all the time, all would be well. If everyone were to break all of the Commandments all of the time, then chaos and death in this life would reign, not to mention eternal damnation in the life to come would be the result.

But then Kant applies his test ironclad test—*It's either wrong for everyone or right for everyone*—to the special case of truth and falsehood, the case of telling the truth and telling a lie. And he is not naïve about it. He chooses the toughest case to test his theory that we are to tell the truth, the *facts* of the case, under *all* circumstances, without exception, or we are liars and hypocrites. But what if, Kant himself asks, my friend runs into

my house in order to escape a madman with an axe bent on killing my friend? The answer is simple, if painful, according to the philosopher: If the mad would-be axe-murderer comes to my door and asks whether I have seen my friend or know his whereabouts, I am bound to answer his question without evasion. Too bad for me, and too bad for my friend!

Would *you* do that were *I* your friend? If so, then let's rethink our relationship! You *know* you would withhold the truth from a person or organization bent on evil, wouldn't you? Wouldn't you? Perhaps you have never been put in that situation. A great many people have.

The Lutheran pastor, theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writes about just this, about what it means to 'tell the truth' in an evil situation in the book he nearly finished before his execution, his *Ethics*. Pastor Bonhoeffer wrote a great deal in that book on themes ranging from sexuality to suicide, but there is even more content between the lines which he

directed at those conscientious Christians who were also loyal and patriotic German citizens faced with some terrible choices, choices like praying for the defeat of the evil regime of their own country, knowing that it would mean the collapse of Germany and probably a terrible retribution in place of a future for themselves and their children. Army officers, many of whose families had served the nation honorably as Christian knights since the time of the Crusades, had been required to swear an oath of personal loyalty to Adolf Hitler. Though they knew now that that oath was in conflict with their duty to God, could they *in good conscience* participate in a plot for Hitler's overthrow, a plot which by definition means concealing a great many facts, a plot probably involving Hitler's assassination, knowing all the while that the Allies had refused to work with any provisional military government in Germany and that an unspeakable punishment awaited them and their families if the plot failed, as one after another had already failed by 1944?

Could you do it? Could I? I wonder about that, but history records that they *did*, and that, almost to a man and a family involved, they experienced the full force of Nazi barbarism.

Bonhoeffer wants his readers, especially *those* readers who would have read the chapters and sections of his book printed clandestinely on mimeograph machines and typewriters, to be very clear about what serving God rather than men would mean in that context. He gives as an example—harmless enough should his text fall into the wrong hands—a schoolboy being browbeaten by his teacher in front of the class. This example has always been easy for me to understand when I think back to the first semester of my own fifth-grade experience. The schoolteacher in Bonhoeffer's example, as in my own experience, is a sadist who enjoys picking on the weak and making them squirm. One day, out of sheer boredom and a propos of nothing in particular, the teacher calls on the little boy to stand

and demands that he answer a question before the class. “Is it not true that your father is a drunkard?!”

Now, the boy may or may not love his father. The boy’s father may or may not be a drunkard, but the boy knows that a line has been crossed, a line that he must hold at any cost. The teacher has used an alleged family secret to make the boy himself look like trash. But the boy is *not* trash, and he knows it. He knows in that moment that his options are few, but that he must defend his personhood somehow. The boy is very small and he is not feeling clever enough to answer a question with a question that day, so, instead, he answers the teacher’s malicious demand for facts with silence. “Did you not *hear* me?!” the teacher shrieks. Even the blows that come later around his head, ears and shoulders do not force him to give to evil that to which it has no right, truth which it will only use to bolster the lie of its own rightness, its own false claim to power.

This is, admittedly, an exceptional situation, as was the situation of the German resistance to the Nazi terror. But both situations illustrate the absolute imperative the just person has to *withhold* truth in the form of facts from malevolent liars, from unjust pretenders to power. Why?

Look what evil does with truth, look what the malevolent do with facts, with truths and half truths when they get hold of them: “Why, did you hear that . . . ?” or “Didn’t you know that . . . ?” or “Is that what *you* think? Well, I know the *real* story . . . !” or “/ heard that” Some people specialize in this sort of fact-gathering for the purpose of character assassination. Some people make of this a profession. When such professional liars serve in positions of great responsibility, even in the highest echelons of government, the consequences can be dire indeed. Not only individuals, but *many* people and even the whole nation can be harmed by such malevolent telling of facts, rearranging of details, for the purpose of hurting, of punishing

those whom the powerful wish to see crushed. If there is still justice in this land, and if those accused of such malicious use of classified information are guilty of treason in the service of their masters, may the blame be assigned where it belongs and be punished as it deserves.

But the publication of state secrets for malevolent ends is an example perhaps still too distant from us for us to understand, for us to apply Jesus' sovereign silence in the face of an evil onslaught. The 8th Commandment, literally forbidding false testimony against someone in a court of law, enjoins us not to 'bear false witness against' not 'another individual' but rather 'your *neighbor*.' That is, the other person, *as person*, is not just a cipher, not a stranger, but instead my *neighbor*, my *kin*. According to the Catechism, even if I know facts that might damage the other's name and reputation, I am to cover these and protect the neighbor's good name. You and I are to be, as Jesus was, 'aware of their malice,' aware of the fact that we live in a

world that is receptive to that which tears down and maligns instead of building up.

You and I are to be aware that *we* are receptive to such talk, that *we* perpetuate it, adding a little falsehood to even less fact, rearranging the furniture of reality so as to sensationalize the destruction of the subject of our gossip. Some do this casually, habitually, while others plan their lying carefully, telling repeatedly what they either know to be false or what they never knew in the first place, lies fashioned out of whole cloth, so that others will believe it, so that, finally, pitifully, they believe it themselves.

This congregation continues to be the subject of such destructive talk in this community. What should be our response? Should we inventory the absurd falsehoods, keep a cross-index of all the crack-brained gossip and try to track down the source of each baseless and illogical lie? The source ought to be as clear to us as it was to Our Lord Jesus Christ, and our

response should be His, only save us, Lord God, Holy Spirit, from falling into the pit of defending and justifying ourselves by tearing down others, for it is You Who will lead us into all truth as Our Savior promised, and not we ourselves. ✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to our God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. ✠ Amen.

S. D. G.!