

Sermon 011815 Honesty
Scripture Genesis 12: 10-20
Sermon Title- Grey Lies

Note to Reader:

This is a different kind of sermon. A woman who is a leader in my church named Val Mason will begin the sermon by telling an extraordinary story about an experience she had when she was eight years old. It was 1979 in Iran. Her dad worked for EDS, Ross Perrot's company. It was the time of the fall of the Shah and the Islamic revolution. Many Americans fled Iran but some didn't make it out, which resulted in the hostage crisis. Val's adopted baby brother had papers to get into the USA but not papers to leave Iran. Iran was literally falling apart. Her dad got tickets to fly out (a story in itself) and the family went to the airport. Val's parents piled the family coats on top of Val's baby brother and her mom had Val push the baby carriage while they went through security. By God's grace, security did not check under the coats and the family and the baby made it out safely. Val and her brother are particularly close to this day. When Val told the story to Meg and me, her eyes were brimming with tears. I expect the same when she tells the church. When she completes her story, she'll go sit in the congregation with her husband and three sons and I will get up to give this sermon:

Thank you, Val, for sharing your powerful story. Those of us who know Val have seen that she is not only a woman of strong intellect, but she is a woman of character and power. I have told Val that in those ways she reminds me of my wife, which is high praise indeed. When I hear her story, it makes sense that it contributed to her strength of character. At age 8 she was thrown into a situation where she had to show courage and resolve and she came through.

There is an aspect to her story that fascinates me. She participated in a plot to deceive the authorities in order to get her baby brother out of Iran. We teach our children that honesty is the best policy, right? Tell the truth is the lesson we all get from our parents. But in this case dishonesty was the right thing to do.

There is a Bible story that has dishonesty as the best policy, too. We heard the story a few moments ago. Abraham lied to the Pharaoh. He said that Sarah was his sister when she was his wife. Abraham's lie helped he and Sarah survive. So what do we make of this?

I actually have a third story from real life. The story is in one of the most powerful books I've ever read, *Night*, written by Ellie Wiesel. Ellie Wiesel was my professor at BU School of Theology. *Night* recounts Ellie's holocaust experience. He and his family

were taken by cattle car to Auschwitz, the huge death camp run by one of the most evil people who ever lived, Joseph Mengele.

Ellie was 15 years old at the time. He was in line to appear before Mengele when he was coached to say that he was 18. He lied and said he was 18 and went into the work detail instead of the ovens. I can attest that when you are in the presence of Ellie Wiesel, you experience his great strength of character. The former Secretary General of the UN called Wiesel his moral ambassador to the world. Again, deception and lying were the right things to do.

So we have the Bible and two modern stories pushing back on the virtue of truthfulness. Let's take a closer look at this honesty is the best policy idea.

Honesty sometimes has unwelcome consequences. Consider a spouse who decides to come clean and tells their husband or wife that they had an affair but it's over now. It is less of an issue today, but what about all the men and women and boys and girls who tire of living a lie and come out as gay? Honesty has consequences.

Have you ever known someone who is brutally honest? Do you find them difficult or easy to be around? Do you come away enlightened by his or her honesty or burned by his or her tone and

words? Have you ever tried to tell someone that they are being hurtful and have them turn it right back on you?

We've all heard the bromide, "It's not what you say, it's how you say it." I think it should be phrased, "It is what you say and how you say it."

There's the story of the woman leaving worship who told the pastor that she enjoyed the sermon. The pastor said, "Don't thank me; thank the Lord." The woman responded, "It wasn't that good!"

Excuse me for saying it like this, but let's be honest. We couch what we say and those of us who don't couch what we say may not be very well liked. We dance around honesty for the good of all. If we are to be honest with each other, we have to admit that we are not fully honest with each other.

Now, is honesty ever the best policy? Of course it is. If you took and ate a cookie and mommy asks you if you took and ate a cookie, it is best to be honest. I actually have a personal story about that. I was maybe five years old in my grandmother's kitchen on Bowdin Street in Dorchester. She was a diabetic and was in a wheelchair with some toes already removed. There was a bag of cookies on the kitchen table and my nana ate one. My Aunt Edna came in and rather crossly asked nana if she ate a cookie. I piped up and said I ate the cookie. I lied but I was covering for

nana. Well, that was my first and maybe last time as a hero. My nana died not long after that with me as the apple of her eye.

Now, I need to real this sermon back in. Please don't leave here saying that your pastor is encouraging you to be dishonest, because I'm not. What I'm suggesting is that there are white lies, black lies, and lots of grey area. Black lies help you at someone else's expense so are always wrong. White lies help someone else and are fair game. Grey lies are often for the betterment of all. We will always be well advised to think before we speak.

Many times even in a single day, we are at the honesty/dishonesty fork in the road. We can all look for the greater good before making our choices. As Prof. Dumbledore said to Harry Potter, "It is not your abilities that makes you who you are, Harry, it is your choices."

There are good choices, better choices, and best choices. There are bad choices, worse choices, and worst choices. So much of life is sorting those choices out.

I think that Val's story, Abraham's story, and Ellie Wiesel's story show us that they were called to higher moral levels, which made deception the best choice. When survival is at stake, do whatever it takes. Each of us needs to find in each situation the highest moral calling.

I'll leave you with this. If we are honest, we must admit that much of our time is spent pretending. There is a time that calls for total honesty. When we turn to God in prayer, we must present our real selves, our sins and hurts, our strengths and weaknesses. We ask God's guidance in becoming the person God wants us to be.

AMEN