

Rolheiser: Playing loose with the truth

It can be quite disheartening to watch the news these days. Our world is full of hatred, bigotry, racism, and over-stimulated greed and ego. The gap between the rich and poor is widening and random, senseless violence is an everyday occurrence. One lives with hope, but without much optimism.

Among all of this, perhaps the most distressing thing of all is the erosion of our capacity to recognize and acknowledge the truth.

From the highest government offices, to the major media outlets, to our local newspapers, to the thousands of bloggers, down to our dinner tables, we are becoming irresponsible, manipulative, and outright dishonest with the truth, denying it where it's inconvenient, bending it to suit our own purposes, or labeling it as "fake news", "an alternative fact", "misinformation", "a truth that's no longer operative", or as "political correctness" with no truth value.

Studies from major scientific institutes are dismissed as just another opinion with the result that we are creating an entire society within which it's becoming more and more difficult for any of us to trust what's a fact and what isn't. That's dangerous territory, not just politically but especially spiritually.

Scripture tells us that *Satan is the Prince of Lies* and Jesus makes it clear that, among all sins, failure to acknowledge the truth is far and away the most dangerous. We see this motif particularly in the text that warns us that we can commit a sin that's *unforgiveable* because it's a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. .

What's this sin? Why is it unforgiveable? And what has it got to do with telling lies?

The unforgiveable sin is precisely the sin of lying which can become unforgiveable because of what lying can do to us. Here's how the biblical text unfolds: Jesus has just cast out a demon. Part of the Jewish faith at that time was the belief that only someone who came from God had power to cast out a demon. Jesus had done that, but the Scribes and Pharisees who have just witnessed this found it to be an inconvenient truth since they denied Jesus' goodness.

So in the face of truth they had to either acknowledge something that they did not want to or they had to manipulate the truth to give it a different meaning. They chose the latter and, clearly aware that they were manipulating the truth, accused Jesus of performing the miracle through the power of Satan.

They knew better, knew they were lying, but the actual truth was too difficult to accept.

Jesus initially tries to argue with them, pointing out that there's no logic in suggesting that Satan is casting out demons. They persist, and it's then Jesus utters his warning: "In truth I tell you, all human sins will be forgiven, and all the blasphemies ever uttered, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, but is guilty of an eternal sin." (*Mark* 3,28-29 parallel text in *Matthew* 12, 31-32). What exactly is this warning?

Jesus is saying this: Be careful about what you are doing just now, putting a false spin on something because it is too awkward to accept as true.

The danger is that if you continue doing this you may eventually come to believe your own lie. That will be unforgiveable, given that you will no longer want to be forgiven because you will see truth as a lie and a lie as the truth. The sin cannot be forgiven, not because God doesn't want to forgive it but because we no longer want to be forgiven.

Dictionaries tell us that blasphemy is the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God. We don't blaspheme when we use foul language when we're frustrated; nor do we blaspheme when we shake our fists at God in anger or turn away from him in bitterness. God can handle that. The one thing God cannot handle is lying, where we lie to the point of believing our own lies (the real danger in lying) because that eventually warps our consciences so that we can no longer tell truth from falsehood or falsehood from truth.

Theology teaches us that God is *One*, this means that God's inner integrity assures that all of reality also has an inner integrity, an intelligibility, meaning that something cannot be and not be at the same time; meaning that two plus two cannot equal anything but four; meaning that a tree is always a tree no matter what you say it is; and meaning that black can never be white. God's Oneness allows us to both trust reality and trust our normal perception of it.

That's what's under attack today, most everywhere. It's the ultimate moral danger: God is One and so two plus two can never be five – and if it is then we are no longer in touch with God or with reality, are warped in conscience, and are blaspheming the Holy Spirit.