

Rolheiser: The Prince of Lies

Looking at our world today, what frightens and unsettles me more than the threat of the COVID virus, more than the growing inequality between the rich and the poor, more than the dangers of climate change, and even more than the bitter hatred that now separates us from each other, is our loss of any sense of truth, our facile denial of whatever truths we judge to be inconvenient, and our slogans of “fake news”, “alternate facts”, and phantom conspiracies. Social media, for all the good it has brought, has also created a platform for anyone to make up his or her own truth and then work at eroding the truths that bind us together and anchor our sanity.

We now live in a world where two plus two often no longer equals four. This plays on our very sanity and has created as certain *social insanity*. The truths which anchor our common life are becoming unmoored.

This is evil, clearly, and Jesus alerts us to that by telling us that Satan is preeminently the *Prince of Lies*. Lying is the ultimate spiritual, moral, and psychological danger. It lies at the root of what Jesus calls the “unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit”.

What’s this sin and why is it unforgivable?

Here’s the context within which Jesus warns us about this sin: He had just cast out a demon. The religious leaders of the time believed as a dogma in their faith that only someone who came from God could cast out a demon. Jesus had just cast out a demon, but their hatred of him made this a very inconvenient truth for them to swallow. So they chose to deny what they knew to be true, to deny reality. They chose to lie, affirming (even as they knew better) that Jesus had done it by the power of Beelzebub.

Initially Jesus tried to point out the illogic of their position, but they persisted. It’s then that he issued his warning about the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. At that time he’s not accusing them of committing that sin, but he’s warning them that the path they are on, if not corrected, can lead to that sin.

In essence, what he’s saying this: if we tell a lie long enough, eventually we will believe it and this so warps our conscience that we begin to see truth as falsehood and falsehood as truth. The sin then becomes unforgivable because we no longer want to be forgiven nor indeed will accept forgiveness. God is willing to forgive the sin but we are unwilling to accept forgiveness because we see sin as good and goodness as sin.

Why would we want forgiveness?

It’s possible to end up in this state, a state wherein we judge the gifts of

the Holy Spirit (charity, joy, peace, patience, goodness, endurance, fidelity, mildness, and chastity) as false, as being against life, as a malevolent naiveté. And the first step in moving towards this condition is lying, refusing to acknowledge the truth. The subsequent steps also are lying, that is, the continued refusal to accept the truth so that eventually we believe our own lies and we see them as the truth and the truth as a lie. Bluntly put, that's what constitutes hell.

Hell isn't a place where one is sorrowful, repentant, and begging God for just one more chance to make things right. Nor is hell ever a nasty surprise waiting for an essentially honest person. If there's anyone in hell, that person is there in arrogance, pitying people in heaven, seeing heaven as hell, darkness as light, falsehood as truth, evil as goodness, hatred as love, empathy as weakness, arrogance as strength, sanity as insanity, and God as the devil.

One of the central lessons in the gospels is this: lying is dangerous, the most dangerous of all sins. And this doesn't just play out in terms of our relationship with God and the Holy Spirit.

When we lie we're not only playing fast and loose with God, we're also playing fast and loose with our own sanity. Our sanity is contingent on what classical theology terms the "Oneness" of God. What this means in lay terms is that God is consistent. There are no contradictions inside of God and because of that, reality can also be trusted to be consistent. Our sanity depends on that trust.

For instance, should we ever arrive at a day where two plus two no longer equals four, then the very underpinnings of our sanity will be gone; we'll literally be unmoored. Our personal sanity and our social sanity depend upon the truth, upon us acknowledging the truth, upon us telling the truth, and upon two plus two forever equaling four.

Martin Luther once said: *sin boldly!* He meant a lot of things by that, but one thing he certainly did mean is that the ultimate spiritual and moral danger is to cover our weaknesses with lies because *Satan is the Prince of Lies!*