

Sermon Jeremiah 23:23-32

What Profit Is There in Being a Prophet?

10th Sunday after Pentecost

August 17th, 2025

Is lying always wrong?

In 1942, German troupes started invading France – first the northern parts, later also the south. As the Nazis and their French collaborators took over, the systematic persecution, deportation, and murder of the French Jewish population began. Out of 100 French Catholic archbishops, only 6 raised their prophetic voices and protested the inhumane treatment of the Jews by the Vichy government, which was in lockstep with the Nazi occupiers. One of them, Jules-Geraud Saliège, archbishop of Toulouse, wrote a letter to the priests in his diocese, asking them to read the following pastoral letter to their congregations:

"In our diocese, moving scenes have occurred. Children, women, men, fathers and mothers are treated like a lowly herd. Members of a single family are separated from each other and carted away to an unknown destination. The Jews are men, the Jewesses are women. They are part of the human race; they are our brothers like so many others. A Christian cannot forget this."* Does this sound eerily familiar to you?

Sister Denise Bergon, who was the mother superior of a convent near Toulouse, was moved and inspired by those words; she decided to hide Jewish children in the convent by pretending that they were attending the convent's boarding school. She knew it was risky business, and she didn't want to get her fellow nuns into trouble, so she wrote to Archbishop Saliège for advice. Saliège wrote back, "Let's lie, let's lie, my daughter, as long as we are saving human lives."

Sister Denise was able to save 83 Jewish children – by lying to the sisters in the convent about the children's identity, by lying to the authorities. And she wasn't the only one: there were several monasteries and convents where Jews and other folks hiding from the Nazi regime found refuge. And of course we are all familiar with the story of Anne Frank

and her family, who were hidden away by good Samaritans in a house in Amsterdam. More people than you think, moved by their faith or sheer human decency, courageously risked their lives and safety to save their neighbor – by lying and deceiving the authorities.

It's a strange thing about lies: lies beget lies. In Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe, it all started with aggressive Nazi propaganda based on lies and misinformation about 'undesirable' groups of the population. And lies and misinformation lead to distrust. What can we believe? Whom can we trust? And if you don't know whom to trust in an authoritarian system, you start lying yourself. Like Sister Denise.

In general, distrust leads to the erosion of community. And so the spreading of misinformation and the sowing of distrust are in the playbook of any authoritarian government. It's easier to commit atrocities when people are divided – and afraid of the other.

According to our Holy Scriptures, roughly 2,500 years ago God gave the 10 commandments to Moses and the people of Israel as they were wandering in the wilderness and getting ready to enter the Promised Land, to become their own society, after the exodus from Egypt. And every society needs rules, a code of conduct, to function. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that one of the commandments is, 'Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor'. For a society to function, there needs to be trust, and trust is eroded when people lie and cheat. God knew – God knows – that people can only live together when they trust each other.

Now we usually interpret, 'thou shalt not bear false witness against your neighbor' as, 'thou shalt not lie'. But I think God's commandment isn't so much concerned about lies in general, but rather focuses on false witness, lies, misinformation, that cause harm to someone else - bearing false witness to get an advantage and/or getting someone else into trouble. God knows what this kind of deceit does to any community and society.

And God is raving mad about lies and deceit that harm others spread in God's name. We heard that passionately angry passage against false prophets in today's scripture lesson from the (legit) Prophet Jeremiah. And what exactly is God mad about? In a nutshell: at the time of Jeremiah, around the year 600 BCE, King

Zedekiah and the political leadership of the kingdom of Judah (with its capital Jerusalem) are playing a dangerous power game. At that point, Judah is a tributary of the Babylonian super power to the northeast. But Zedekiah is trying to shed the yoke with the help of the Egyptians, another super power trying to expand its territory onto the Asian continent. So Zedekiah forges an allegiance with Egypt, and stops payments to Babylon.

This is where Jeremiah's story comes in. Jeremiah is a reluctant prophet – like so many we find in the books of the Old Testament. Because he knows that God's word will not be received well, and that he might be attacked for it. And guess what? He is right! God basically is trying to warn Judah's political leadership to not play dangerous political games, and put all their chips on the Egyptians. Be patient, God says. Empires rise and fall. The Babylonians' power will fade eventually as well. Enjoy the relative freedoms you still have. Because if you don't – you will be utterly destroyed.

Did the Judean leadership like to hear this? No. And Jeremiah? Is ridiculed, humiliated, put under house arrest, and even thrown in a dried up cistern in retaliation for his 'presumptuous' prophecies that just don't fit the predominant agenda. At the same time, there are those prophets who would agree with the political leadership – I have dreamed, I have dreamed...that it's God's will that we forge an alliance with the Egyptians. Those prophets profit from their convenient and accommodating messages, quite literally, as they receive favors and rewards from those in power.

But the accommodating words of the false prophets, their false witness, lead to disaster. Babylon besieges Jerusalem for several months, during which King Zedekiah stubbornly expects that the Egyptians will come to the rescue. But that never happens. In the end, Jerusalem falls, the temple, the palace, and all town fortifications are destroyed, and the leadership killed or led into the infamous Babylonian Exile. The kingdom of Judah ceases to exist, and becomes a Babylonian province.

No wonder God is mad at those false prophets who bear false witness to the detriment of God's people. God is mad about those who kiss up to those in power instead of challenging it in a healthy way, and who profit from spineless collaboration. Now Jeremiah may have had the satisfaction of saying, in the end, 'I told you so!' But what profit is that as an entire community is destroyed and dismembered?

Throughout history, there have been false prophets, speaking words of support to oppressive, unjust, and destructive systems, or abetting such systems through their silence – like the 94 French archbishops who did not protest the inhumane treatment of Jews in 1942, but cozied up to the government. We still deal with false prophets today, especially in our age of misinformation. Via social media and with the help of AI, it's so easy to commit willful deceit. There are still those who accommodate human power instead of questioning it. There are still those who support destructive systems of racism, sexism, exceptionalism, and injustice instead of challenging them. There are still those who are quick to judge others in self-righteousness and thrive on division and the erosion of trust, because it benefits them somehow. Enormous harm is done to the neighbor as false witness is spread. Often in the name of God...

As in the days of Jeremiah, the words of the false prophets will eventually spell disaster. False witness leads to downfall, as trust is eroded, interdependence and community are destroyed, society is undermined, and life-denying forces like indifference, fear, contempt, jealousy and dehumanization take over.

There is no profit in the unthankful task of being a prophet who proclaims God's Word as we find it in our Holy Scriptures – and especially the words and deeds of Jesus Christ – today; God's Word, which talks about love for friend and foe, compassion, justice, humility, welcome of the stranger, support of the marginalized, and a community in which we all serve each other and forgive each other, as we are being served and have been forgiven. And yet, we all are called to courageously speak of the God of life, whose promised kingdom is a realm of peace, justice, and enough for all. A God who wants this realm to be established on earth, as it is in heaven, without the nasty side effects of an authoritarian and oppressive theocracy enforced by deeply flawed and sinful men.

I hope and pray that we - moved by our faith, or just human decency - call out the false prophets of our time, and their lies and deceptions. I hope and pray that we - moved by our faith, or just human decency - rise up and speak truth – God's truth, as we find it in the Scriptures - to power. I hope and pray that we never give up building trust with each other, lest we are weakened through polarization and isolation. May God give us the strength and courage to do so. Amen

**this quote is taken from the following website, which tells the whole story:*
<https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-54033792>