

4th Sunday Ordinary Time
January 28-29, 2017

“O What a Tangled Web We Weave”

Readings: Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13; 1 Cor. 1:26-31; Matt. 8:23-27

I can still remember my first lie as if it had happened yesterday. I was likely four or five years old. I suspect my mother had scolded me for something, but as she turned away, I felt compelled to extend my tongue in her general vicinity. She suddenly looked back and though I tried to hide the evidence, it was too late. “Did you just stick your tongue out at me?” “No,” I sheepishly replied, not at all convincingly. “You had better not,” came the stern rejoinder.

I left and went to my room, where within 30 seconds, I was consumed by guilt. I sheepishly walked back into the room and admitted my lie, which as I was later told, was worse than the act itself. The fact that I was trying to cover up reflected more poorly upon me than the act that I had tried to conceal.

In today’s First Reading, the prophet Zephaniah speaks of the “remnant of Israel,” of those who “shall do no wrong and speak no lies.” Zephaniah identifies wickedness with arrogance and greed, identifying the righteous poor and afflicted ones who put their trust in the Lord as those who will survive. It is this “remnant,” purified by their hardships who will “pasture and couch their flocks” in peace. Righteousness is equated with honesty and integrity.

The 19th century Scottish novelist Walter Scott (d. 1832) wrote an epic poem about a fictitious Lord Marmion, a favorite of King Henry VIII. Marmion had eyes for a very wealthy woman named Clare. There was just one problem– she was engaged to another man. Marmion’s plot included forging a letter that would implicate Clare’s fiancé in treason. His plot failed, and he was caught in his lie. The poem, includes one line, long since remembered:
“O, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!”

Perhaps one reason why this line has endured in the world of poetry is because we ourselves know just how quickly our lies can entangle our lives. Nature itself confirms this. When a spider web captures the morning dew, it is beautiful, and even quite intricate. Information Technology pioneers named the Internet the World Wide Web, to show forth the interconnectedness of everything.

Web-Spinning spiders only use the tips of their legs when creating their webs so that their body doesn't come in contact with the web and get stuck. Human beings are **not** so fortunate when we spin a lie. At first, all seems well. We avoid trouble with our supervisor, we receive an extension from a professor; we produced a plausible story, but then, little by little, it all begins to unravel.

Our lies catch up, and the damage can be significant to the good of our souls. Saint Augustine would clarify: "A *lie* consists in speaking a falsehood with the intention of deceiving."¹ And that's the point.

Other concrete cases are more difficult for the observant Catholic. Some who are seeking spiritual counsel ask, "Father, somebody caught me off guard with a question... 'Is it true that the such-and-such are having problems?' If I know this is true, must I tell them?" Our faith teaches: "The duty to avoid scandal often commands strict discretion. No one is bound to reveal the **truth** to **someone** who does not have the **right** to **know** it."²

So no, you are **not** *compelled* to confirm this.³ If someone were to approach out of genuine concern and was in a position to help, then sharing such information could be justified. The context will guide the decision here.

¹ St. Augustine, *De mendacio* 4,5

² See Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph # 2489

³ Possessing the truth in no way binds us to publicly disclose it, unless public harm would follow from our failure to do so.

But as often, it is gossip, which is itself sinful behavior. To cooperate in the propagation of gossip is to abet the sin itself—something we ought to avoid in any case.

As observant Catholics, we fervently hope that truth and honesty will carry the day. Nor can we shield ourselves from the reality that many in our society have tangled intricate webs of deceit such that they may have even fooled themselves, justifying their actions to assuage their consciences. This must not happen with us, and only an absolute commitment to honor the truth will suffice.

Rash judgment, detraction and calumny are other serious offenses against the truth and must be rejected out of hand. Those offenses tear apart families, rupture once strong friendships or working environments. They create a pervasive atmosphere of mistrust, even amongst good and faithful people. As Catholics, we must remain firmly committed to the truth, and never accept short cuts or petty rationalizations.

Let not a deceitful tongue find a home in our hearts. The Lord can help to untangle the web, bringing forth in its place virtue and integrity. The “clean of heart” will find a home with God; please Lord, help us to be among their number.