

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

When George Washington was six years old, he received a hatchet. While playing with it, he damaged his father Augustine's cherry tree. Gus discovered the destruction, became angry, and confronted his son. George said to his father, "I cannot tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet." Gus Washington then embraced his son and said that honesty was worth more than a thousand trees. That is a popular story about the first president of the United States and about the importance of being honest. But it never happened. George Washington died in 1799. Mason Locke Weems made up the story and put it in his biography of Washington in 1806. He meant no harm, but Weems told a lie in order to show the value of telling the truth.

Today people expect that the president will lie to them. Eight years ago about 30% of the people thought that the two American presidential candidates were dishonest; about 60 to 70% think that today's two presidential candidates are dishonest. But people voted for them in the primaries. We are almost too casual about lying.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, "A lie consists in speaking a falsehood with the intention of deceiving." The eighth commandment is, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."

People lie for various reasons. Sometimes they've done something wrong, and they cover it up by reporting something else. Other times people want to hurt someone, so they trick them into harmful actions. Some people lie when applying for a job. Usually people lie with some other purpose in mind - hoping for a good result for themselves or a bad result for someone they hate.

The Christian tradition defends the importance of the truth. John's gospel says that Jesus came to us "full of grace and truth." Jesus promised that he would send us "the Spirit of truth." He told his disciples that "the truth would make you free." After his arrest he announced that he had come "to testify to the truth," which caused Pilate to ask, "What is truth?" Perhaps Pilate was so familiar with lies that he had forgotten what it was.

At the end of each epistle, St. Paul gives some practical advice to his readers. In the Letter to the Colossians, he tells them, "Put to death, then, the parts of you that are earthly: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and the greed that is idolatry." And then he says directly and strongly, "Stop lying to one another." He has a specific reason: not so that the Colossians can become good people, but because they already are. They already have been raised with Christ through baptism. They already are hidden with Christ in God. They already are with Christ, who is seated at the right hand of God. Paul asks all of us not to live up to who we could be, but to live up to who we are.

Not all politicians are dishonest. Some of those running for office in local elections, for example, are people of outstanding character. We all need to take the truth seriously. We should rid our own lives of lies because of who we are, and we should expect the truth in our families and from those who lead this country.