
Would You Rather Lie to Your Boss or to Your Priest?

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler

Atlanta, Georgia

14 Pentecost, Proper 16A in the Revised Common Lectionary

*Jesus said, "I tell you, you are Peter,
and on this rock I will build my church,
and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.
I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven,
and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

Matthew 16:18-19

It is generally understood that Jesus Christ began the Christian Church with those sentences. He looked at his right hand man, his closest disciple, the one who was so impetuous and foolhardy. Peter! The one who would confess Jesus as the Christ and also the one who would betray that same Christ.

The word "Peter" means rock, and Jesus built his church on that confession -and confusion-- of Peter. Later churches would claim that Peter was the first Pope of Rome!

It was my great honor yesterday to witness one of the more recent priestly additions to the Christian Church. We ordained George Maxwell a priest yesterday. George follows a long line of those whom the church has called to bless and forgive; we bless and forgive, in the name of the same Jesus who called Peter forth.

It was a grand and glorious ordination, and we benefit from it this morning as George presides at his first Eucharist.

After the service yesterday, I went out for a hamburger. I knew that the Atlanta Braves were playing baseball then, so I drove down to one of our local grills, the Cheyenne Grill, where I knew I could watch some baseball while I had lunch. I chose a great table and asked them to turn one of their several thousand televisions to the Braves game. (Go Braves!)

Well, I watched some of the baseball game, but I also had to glance every now and then at all the other television screens. It's amazing how a screen, any screen, grabs the attention of modern humanity!

On most of the other screens, the restaurant was showing a trivia game. Apparently, this is one of the latest pastimes at neighborhood pubs. Folks use remote control devices and play trivia games with the restaurant and each other.

I thought the questions were bizarre! What is the difference between caramel and toffee? What was Little Richard's first hit in 1954? Later, the game asked how you to guess the results of survey questions. Would you rather do this or that? How did people in our survey answer?

Then came the question of the day. Here are the two choices they gave. Would you rather lie to your boss or lie to your priest?

Would you rather lie to your boss or lie to your priest?

Well, that question got my attention. In fact, I pondered it so long that I never saw the survey results.

I imagine that most of us would rather not lie at all, right? But if you had to lie to one or the other, I would suggest that you lie to, the priest.

Here's the reason: Lies are always temporary. Falsehood is always temporary. Lies do not last. They may sound good, and they may convince for a long time, but only the truth lasts forever. Only the truth holds.

So, sooner or later, your boss or your priest is going to discover the truth. They will uncover the lie. Then, which one would you rather be in relationship with? The boss, at least the stereotypical boss, has the power to dismiss you, to fire you. You're out.

But the priest. What power does a priest have?

What power does a priest have?

I have asked that question many times in my life. I imagine that George has been asking it lately, too. The church has tried to answer it for centuries.

And the church has often been described as having great power! Consider the great churches of the Middle Ages, who owned much of the town, who owned many of the fields and meadows. Consider the great political power that priests and bishops and popes have wielded in centuries past. Consider the financial investments that churches continue to steward and to exercise power with!

Some churches today use their investment power to boycott industries and companies. I travel to Israel later today, a country where some churches are urging economic boycotts.

Many church institutions do have powerful treasure. I am reminded of the story of St. Lawrence, the humble deacon of the Roman Church in the year 258. At the time, the Roman Emperor was executing Christians. In fact, the Roman emperor had just executed the Bishop of Rome!

The emperor grabbed the humble St. Lawrence and demanded to know where all the gold and silver of the Church was. Lawrence asked for three days so he could gather it up. The emperor was delighted and let him go! Then, for three days, St. Lawrence went throughout the city and gathered up all those who were being supported by the church - the poor, the handicapped, the unfortunate. When the emperor showed back up, Lawrence exclaimed, "Here! Here are the treasures of the Church!" (That's how Lawrence became Saint Lawrence.)

Saint Lawrence was a deacon. That's what deacons do. They care for the treasures of the church.

When Jesus looked at Peter and said, "Upon this rock I will build my church, and I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven," what power was he giving to the church? And what power was he giving to the priesthood of the church, the first bishop of Rome?

The answer is simple. It is the power to forgive. It is the power to bless.

"Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven!" said Jesus. Well the word "loose" means "to let go of." In fact, it means to "forgive." That's why in the Gospel of John, Jesus says "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven." Jesus was giving his disciples the power to let go, the power to forgive.

This power to forgive is an incredible power. The Christian Church is the only institution in the world that claims to have the power to forgive. In fact, I bet no other institution wants that power. Because forgiveness is the giving away of power.

There are two things that George Maxwell can do, formally and officially, that he could not do two days ago. As a priest now, he can declare God's forgiveness for the Church, and he can bless for the Church.

That's why, if you have to lie, and you have a choice to lie to your boss or to your priest, you should always lie to your priest.

Your priest has the power to forgive and to bless. And your priest doesn't have merely the *power* to forgive and to bless. Your priest has the *obligation* to forgive and to bless. It is a sacred obligation that priests accept, the obligation to forgive and let go, to release people into a new life - and the obligation to bless: to bless wine and bread, the ordinary things of life that become holy when touched by God's blessing. That obligation is a vocation.

But you know what?

This sermon is not about priests. Jesus did not use the word "priest" in today's gospel. Now I believe in priests, for sure. But priests are meant only to represent something else; they represent the grace of God in the larger church. Yes, priests are changed, for sure; priests "re-present."

Jesus specifically gave this power of forgiveness and blessing not to priests, but to "the church," the gathered assembly. That's right. To all of us. Every single one of us has the power to forgive and the power to bless.

You know that. You know it in those moments when you have only a split second to decide. Those choices occur every day. They occur in disagreements in the home, at work or at church. Those choices occur in traffic, in contracts, in leisure, and at play. The clock is ticking, and you have a second to decide. Will you hold on to anger and resentment, or will you forgive and let go? Will you curse, or will you bless?

Yes, priests have an important role in whether to bless or to curse, but they do not have the final role. The final role belongs to all of us, to the Church.

The people who confess, like Peter, that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God, should be the people who forgive. With so many ways that people are claiming to be Christian today, with so many ways that Christians are claiming to exercise our power, the greatest test today of whether one believes Jesus is the Christ is whether one is able to forgive.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip