

Oaths, Armor, and Fine Cloth
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"I thoughtfully express the truth.
I avoid the confusion of dishonest words

I promote harmony and positive momentum to bring out the best in everyone. I avoid causing alienation, doubt, and division among others.."

These assertions are a part of the Code of Mindful action at the dojo near my home. Lest you imagine the possibility that I might be secretly building my ninja skills, I will tell you I hear this from the bench from which I am watching my child flip a grown man with something that resembles a broomstick.

And I feel like I am posing a question from a parable when I say to you: which is harder? A mere child flipping a man over her back using a broomstick, or an adult avoiding the confusion of dishonest words - and also avoiding being the cause of alienation, doubt, and division among others?

My lived experience suggests to me that one of these is more easily achieved than the others.

I've been thinking about all of this as I sat with the scripture for this week.

We return to our David - the shepherd turned king - story time to find that, once again, upon this fourth introduction, Saul does not know who David is. "Whose son are you boy?" It's an entertaining trope, I suppose. More precisely, as I mentioned last week, it is part of the evidence that this is a collection of stories and not a history - and that the listeners were quite comfortable hearing stories that didn't quite match up. And so we tune in, instead, to what THIS telling is about.

First there is the beautiful telling of Jonathan's love for David - the soul of Jonathan is bound to the soul of David. Jonathan loves David as he loves his own soul.

There is a certain set of scholars who will do backbends to assert that this love is not romantic, but only covenantal love. That seems awfully contrived and suspicious to me - but you can read the text for yourself. And though our texts today are about so much more, we shouldn't let this description of deeply affected love between David and Jonathan slip by without remark.

Of particular interest are Jonathan's actions towards David - he cloaks him in his royal robe, his fine cloth, and he also clothes him in his armor. And we are left with this curious, understated connection between what David puts on, and the success that he achieves.

But we are also told that Jonathan makes a covenant with David. He covers him in the language of covenant. So that David proceeds into battle covered both literally and figuratively in some sort of royal promise.

Covenants have something to do with loyalty, with an oath. And these covenants and oaths were held in high regard by the people Israel - they were not to be taken lightly, they were not a part of casual speech. (Gafney, Year W, 268). They usually invoked God's name or God's power or God's reign as the sort of guarantor of the promise made. And they populate story after story in the Hebrew Bible.

This tradition of oath-making undergirds Jesus' instruction in the gospel of Matthew in today's reading.

This gospel passage comes in a series where Jesus is differentiating how things used to be understood with his teaching. You have heard it said....but I say. And Jesus says- you have heard it said, don't swear falsely, but I say - don't swear oaths at all.

Don't swear in passing. Don't swear with gravitas - don't swear by God or by God's creation. Don't even swear by our own heads, Jesus says.

I wonder what there is for us to hear in this simple and precise exhortation and whether it is more about the words that we use, or the way that we invoke God.

After I graduated from law school I clerked for a federal magistrate judge and had to be sworn into the federal bar. I refused to be sworn in on a Bible. And, instead, I wrote a whole article about it. How can we swear an oath on the very text that says "do not swear an oath"?

But is an awfully *legalistic example.

What else is this about?

Around here, we often say "I will with God's help" instead of "with God as my witness" - and that feels like a good and appropriate habit.

I certainly catch myself saying "I swear to you..." this is often directed at a child. "I swear to you that if you say that one more time then..." And I think I'd like to really work on not saying that, for a whole lot of reasons. But one of them is because the Bible tells me so.

But again-what is this really about?

Commentary on this passage posits that there would be no need for an oath were there not a habit of frequent lying. That it exists only if one accepts the possibility of dishonest words.

I think what this is REALLY about is avoiding the confusion of dishonest words. The very thing my child says at the dojo every week. Jesus is saying- don't swear on God or anything else - just be a person who never uses words dishonestly.

"Never using words dishonestly" is about more than just the stark binary between telling lies and telling the truth, isn't it. "Never using words dishonestly" also means not manipulating people emotionally. Not using words to shame. Not gaslighting. Not being passive aggressive. Not saying one thing and meaning another. Not causing division. Not causing doubt.

Jesus is pointing to a long tradition of oath making which he reverses. Out of what patterns of speaking, and communicating, and being might Jesus be calling you?

"Let your yes be yes and your no be no" may be one of Jesus' hardest teachings.

And so we pray for vision and wisdom as we process into this day, into this week, into the lives that beckon us. May the oaths, armor, and fine cloth that we have inherited fall away. May we speak only words of truth.

Amen.