

March 15 – Fourth Sunday in Lent

Telling Lies

Mark 14:53-65

The chapter this week in the book “Our Common Sins” focuses on the trial of Jesus, if you can use that term. Trials, even at this time, were supposed to follow certain rules. The Sanhedrin was the nation’s top legislative and judicial body. If you were giving witness against an individual or about an incident, it was expected that you would tell the truth. They did not have the formula we have in our courts where you are to swear that what you say is the truth but it was expected. Also, if a person was to be convicted of a crime the requirement was that you needed two witnesses and their testimony, in principle, had to agree. What we have recorded in the gospels is a story of the High Priest manipulating the trial, trying to get a verdict that he wants. He rounds up witnesses whom it seems were coached as to what to say. Since they could not agree, everyone in the room knew they were lying. Everyone, including Jesus, knew the High Priest didn’t have a case. That was why, in part, he remained silent. Finally the High Priest asks Jesus if he is the Christ, the son of the living God. When Jesus says yes, the High Priest accuses him of blasphemy, a crime punishable by death. Claiming to be the anointed one or even a son of God was not considered blasphemous, at worst it would have been seen as bad theology. Yet all agreed with the verdict. It was the one that they had come to the night before. They twisted Jesus’ words to proclaim him guilty. Then it was up to the High Priest to take Jesus to Pilate to gain permission for his execution because Rome kept that prerogative.

One of things we know when we read the Gospels is that Jesus trusts the truth. The author says: “On one of his most awful days, he was surrounded by lies and liars.” His actions challenge us and ask us when we have been more like the crowd around Jesus that day instead of one who lives and trusts the truth. Unfortunately, we often find we have failed. But the word of grace is that we can learn from our mistakes, we can become truth tellers. Truth telling must come at the price of humility. It takes courage to live in the truth. Here are some of the reasons lying is so devastating.

Our connection to God is broken when we tell the not-truth to ourselves and to others. This seems obvious, but few dwell on this fact. To use an old image, not telling the truth is like cutting the phone line. The signal is interrupted. God is a God of love and truth.

Falsehood severs the connection. Yes it can be restored but we need to remember it has consequences, our not-truthfulness. Also lying might hurt us physically.

A man goes to see his doctor. He says, “Doctor, I want to be healthier.” The doctor says, “No problem. From now on, always mean what you say.”

That may sound like the start of a joke, but it’s actually a crib note version of results from a new study suggesting that sincerity and honesty are keys to good [health](#).

The study’s author is [Anita E. Kelly](#), a psychology professor at the [University of Notre Dame](#) who runs a [Templeton Foundation](#)-funded research project called The Science of Honesty. Kelly and her team recruited 72 adults and randomly assigned them to two groups: a Sincerity group and a control group. The control group wasn’t given specific instructions (other than they’d be in a study for the next five weeks, topic unstated), but the Sincerity group was given the following mandate:

“Throughout every day of the next five weeks, you must speak honestly, truthfully, and sincerely — not only about the big things, but also about the small things, such as why you were late. You must always mean what you say in situations where your statements are to be taken seriously, as opposed to when joking or obviously exaggerating. While you certainly can choose not to answer questions, you must always mean what you say.”

During the next five weeks, both groups came to the lab for periodic polygraph tests and standard measures of physical health. By the fifth and final week, Kelly says that the results were “amazing.” The Sincerity group reported significantly less physical health symptoms than the control group – specifically fewer sore throats, headaches, and nausea. They also reported fewer mental health complaints like feeling tense.

The average age of the study participants was 41, and other than the Sincerity group’s mandate to “always mean what you say,” there were no other major distinctions between the groups. The pivotal factor over the five-week period was consistently telling the truth.

Arguably, honesty is not the normal state of affairs for most humans. Kelly estimates that the average person lies about 11 times a day. Perhaps all of that lying causes a continual level of psychosomatic stress that handicaps our immune system.

Why might it have taken five weeks to see results? According to Kelly, “Being sincere is a process.” Going from daily lying to a clean slate takes time. It could also be that the health benefits of telling the truth accrue cumulatively.

Whatever the case, the results are intriguing.

So what is not truthfulness? I use that term deliberately. The reason why is that we want to proclaim lying is only a deliberate telling of a falsehood but there are many other subtle ways to lie, ones that we are all more likely to be guilty of. Let us examine some of them.

When we believe the worst before we believe the best we are entering into the doorway of lying. This is the seedbed for many worse things, such as prejudice, profiling

and all the rest. Technically it isn't a lie, but we are right on the threshold. When we want to believe the worst about a person or group of people and not hear other truths about them this is distorting reality. We are hearing a lot about this kind of not-truthfulness right now in the news. Many people in authority believe the worst about people, whether that be minorities, Muslims, police officers or youth. They ignore all the positive aspects of these labeled people. It is a form of lying and it severs connections with a God who loves all and wants us to see the best in all people.

When we fail to listen closely to the other side, then we close ourselves to the whole truth. And this is another form of lying. This was what was happening in the Sanhedrin. They had made up their mind about Jesus. They didn't want to hear the other side and so closed themselves off from the whole truth because it made them uncomfortable or it challenged some of their assumptions.

Think about times you didn't want to hear the other side so you failed to listen to those opinions or upon hearing them you immediately rejected them as false. We see this often in politics but I see it played out in many areas of life, even the church. Someone comes to a meeting with a new idea but because it might require things to change, something very hard for any group to consider, and you see at least some on the committee mentally putting their hands over their ears. They are sitting there but not listening, they are just forming their questions to prove it isn't workable. We don't want to call this lying but when we are not open to hearing new ideas we are embracing not-truthfulness, which is a form of lying.

We lie when we put too much of ourselves into a story. We are hearing this with the scandal of newsman Brian Williams. But it is easy to stretch a story and make our part bigger and better than it was, usually at the expense of another.

Finally, the author reminds us that when we join in a smear campaign or share hurtful gossip we are lying. This is not standing on the doorway of lying; we have walked into the room. Smear campaigns have one goal, to tear another down. The leaders of Jerusalem had been on this project with Jesus for some time. Sharing hurtful gossip, even if we believe it to be the truth, is still a form of lying. We instinctively know that what we have heard and we are sharing is only, at best a half-truth but we share it because we want to be

“in the know.” At Jesus trial those who testified had heard something about Jesus and the temple and three days but didn’t really understand it. They were coached as to what to say, saying it because it made them look important, even when they knew it was only a bit of the truth. When we have chosen to share that which tears down, sharing pieces of the truth, when we could have chosen to share that which builds up we have committed a form of lying.

But the good news is that we can become truth tellers. We can all do better but we cannot do it on our own. We need the help of God and so we first have to confess how we have allowed not-truthfulness to lead us and change us. So this means that truth telling comes at the price of humility. We have to acknowledge we have failed. We have failed by believing the worst instead of looking for the best. We have failed when we haven’t listened closely to other opinions. We have failed when we have put too much of ourselves into a story and we have failed when we have used half-truths to tear down another. God offers forgiveness if we repent, seeking to change. Humility opens our communication link afresh with God.

Truth telling takes effort and determination. It just doesn’t happen. We have to guard our mind and our mouths. We have to examine our reactions to people, to ideas and to news. We have to examine what we say and how we act and, in humility, do things differently. It is possible to be the voice of truth.

We are always impressed when we hear people become voices of truth. Some of the most dramatic types of this is when someone first confesses how they have been living or sharing a lie for many years but now want to speak the truth. Sometimes we are skeptical of this truth-telling like currently Alex Rodrigues is asking for forgiveness for his use of performance enhancing drugs. Many wonder if his words are sincere and a beginning of truth-telling or a way for him to get the money owed to him by the New York Yankees baseball team. But sometimes a person becoming truthful is a powerful story of growth and change. So be tellers of the truth. It is what Jesus wants, it is how we connect to God and maybe even how we stay healthy!