



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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## Honesty with a Tender Touch

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 12, 2012*

*The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost*

*Based on Ephesians 4:25-5:2 and John 6:35, 41-51*

Apparently lying is alive and well in our culture. This probably does not surprise you. The most recent research indicates that the average American tells eleven lies each week. Eleven—big ones, little ones, all sorts. The American Psychological Association this week announced findings of what is called a "Science of Honesty" study, which was designed to determine if truth-telling improves or harms our physical and mental health.

In the study one group was told not to lie, not even little white lies; the other was not given instructions about lying at all. Each week in the 10-week study, all participants were interviewed about overall health and wellbeing and were given polygraphs to determine the number of lies they had told during the week. Researchers at Notre Dame reported two big findings. First, participants in the study were able to significantly reduce the number of lies they told by being purposeful about not lying; lying, it seems, is a choice over which we can have great agency. Second, participants who adhered to the instructions and lied less did indeed experience measurable improvement in their health. They were less depressed, less tense, and had fewer sore throats and headaches. Further, they reported improvement in their close relationships as well as in overall social interaction. The newly conscious truth-tellers reported that they told the truth about little things like why they really were late getting somewhere or how much they had actually accomplished without exaggerating any details.

Though a small study, it is interesting primarily because it corroborates what common sense tells us\ and because it relates to our epistle reading from the letter to the Ephesians. Telling the truth is better; imagine that. But one note has to be made clear right now before we go on. There is one question to which the answer is always "no" regardless of the truth. When asked by your beloved, "Honey, do these pants make my you-know-what look big?" the answer is always "No, dear, absolutely not." If the answer is really yes, lying is particularly important. Remember that, if nothing else.

*Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin and do not let the sun go down on your anger.*

So begins our passage from Ephesians, which continues other exhortations about acting with kindness, forgiveness, and tenderheartedness. This is neither a list of unreasonable and arbitrary religious rules nor the way to win salvation. It is an example of good religion—and as a religion Christianity is often good—being concerned with transforming life *now* to make it better, not to make it more rigid or rigorous, but to establish in the ordinary living of our lives practices that enhance our humanness. The fact that religion has often been seen—sadly correctly I would say—as truncating life rather than expanding it is a problem with religion, not a problem with God. The letter to the Ephesians has messages of both kinds. In this passage, it is life-giving, but it is clearly culturally limited vis-à-vis the societal norms of its time about men and women. What it has to say about husbands and wives and women's roles in church became sacrosanct almost instantly; interestingly, however, the "rules" about telling the truth, being tenderhearted and kind were a little less automatically taken as the gospel.

On a fairly superficial level truth-telling is both the moral thing to do and the easier thing to do. Any of us who lie—which would be all of us—know that the practice of lying requires much more effort than not lying. I bet every person in this room can remember a time when even a little white lie got us in trouble. We made up an excuse to get out of some minor social obligation—"I can't have dinner tonight because my grandmother is sick," or "I didn't respond to your email because my dog ate the laptop" or something equally ridiculous—only to be

exposed. Suddenly you remember that this person knows you haven't had a living grandparent for twenty-five years and that you don't have a dog! Not so good. It is much easier to remember and adhere to the Oprah-ism, "'No' is a complete sentence." I don't know if that really originated with Oprah, but it sounds like her, and it is true. An honest "no" is better than a lie. I think.

But in many other cases, telling the truth is neither easy nor nice. When faced with a sentence that begins "I am telling you this in love," it is often best to take cover because you are about to hear something you'd probably rather not. But to be clear, this is precisely the kind of truth-telling to which the writer of Ephesians is referring. Addressing the church, the author is making the claim that to be in community demands that we are truthful, when it is easy and when it is not. But it is tricky, and here is why: the first step in being able to healthily tell the truth to others is to be able to admit the truth to ourselves. No one is perfect at this, but it is casual unwillingness to do the work of honesty that holds us back. Although Jesus was clear about the pitfall of identifying the speck in another's eye while totally missing the log in our own, it is still an easy trap. I can so easily see others' faults; mine I sometimes miss.

Before getting high and mighty about the truth, it might help to ask:

- ✚ Is the truth I am just dying to tell necessary (political positions often fall in this category; my political truth is the antithesis of yours and while I am right, telling you my truth probably won't help)?
- ✚ Will it change anything or just make me feel temporarily more righteous?
- ✚ Is it truly spoken in love?
- ✚ Is it important enough to make a big deal out of it (asking this question could save a number of church fights because the answer is often no; the issue has nothing to do with the mission of Christ)?

But when these concerns and probably many I have not imagined have been adequately considered, then speaking the truth has to be done. Neither pretending not to be angry or explaining it away will work. This is particularly dangerous for religious people. There is nothing angrier than a church person, sporting a tight smile and pretending not to be angry when everyone can see the anger oozing out of every pore. "Be angry," the scripture says, "but don't sin." Being angry is not the sin; being angry for the right reason is an absolutely correct behavior. Sinning with regard to anger begins with denying it. Anger is an emotion that every one of us has. It is a misappropriation of Jesus' teaching about loving others that we are never to be angry with anyone. That thinking is crazy-making, truly crazy-making. It is one origin of depression—and at its worst, suicide—or of repression and at its worst the acting out against self or others.

I have attempted at times to be angry righteously. Generally that has resulted in my looking a lot like a self-righteous prig, not my best angle. My conclusion is to just be angry honestly, admitting that my anger always has an element of hurt in it, often some fear as well, and is unfailingly only one side of the problem. But not speaking it truthfully is fair neither to the other nor to me. The benefit of honest anger, however, is totally offset if its expression becomes destructive. Anger does not have to be mean; letting one know that he or she has done wrong and has hurt you does not require his or her verbal dismantlement.

Lofty theology is interesting and part of our tradition, and yet it is not where most of us live. The writers of our sacred scripture are willing to get into the weeds with us if we will go. This piece teaches us to tell and hear the truth, to get honestly angry when we need to, trying to stay there no longer than necessary and even ending it before sundown, and to be as tenderhearted in all of it as we can.

Simple, important words these are—important enough to live by.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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