

The loaded station wagon pulled into the only remaining campsite. 4 children leaped from the vehicle and began feverishly unloading gear and setting up the tent. The boys then rushed to gather firewood leaping from one tree to the next, while the girls and their mother set up the camp stove and cooking utensils. A nearby camper marveled to the youngsters' father: "That, sir, is some display of teamwork." The father replied, "I have a system. No one goes to the bathroom until the camp is set up." (Hodgin, Michael, 1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking)

This section of John's gospel is part of the long discourse that Jesus makes at the Last Supper. Jesus was about to return to His Father, and He wanted to assure His disciples that He would prepare places for them in His Father's house. Jesus offered Himself to them as a map of sorts – He is the way to that place of eternal truth and life. To affirm this role, John's Jesus proclaims yet another of the peculiar phrases to this gospel known as the I AM statements: I AM the way, the truth and the life." These were intended to set Jesus on a par with God.

For those who first read this fourth gospel, the term 'way' brought to mind several references from their Jewish tradition. For example, the Torah was regarded as THE WAY to all truth and wisdom (Ps 119; Wis 5:6; Tobit 1:3). In later Judaism, the monastic community at Qumran understood itself as 'the way'; in their literal interpretation of Isaiah 40:3, this group had withdrawn to the wilderness to prepare for the promised Messiah. Many regarded their lifestyle of strict adherence to the law as the best way of preparing to welcome the bringer of salvation. John the Baptizer, whom some scholars believe had ties to the Qumran community, also understood his mission as herald of the Messiah in similar terms. Evidently some of his contemporaries were of a similar mind since they followed him into the desert and were willing to make his way of prayer and penitence their own in order to be ready to greet the One who was to come.

And then after the death of Jesus, the One who said He is the Way, the Truth and the Life, the followers of Jesus began to refer to themselves as 'the way' or as 'followers of the way' (See Acts 9:2, 19:9; 22:4; 24:14). Today, the challenge for us is to live in such a manner that others might perceive a way to God in the witness we offer in our words and works. At times, we haven't done this very well and we have created scandal. So we continually have to repent and try to more fully follow the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. (adapted from CELEBRATION, p. 3, 22 May 2011)

And so my second point. I'd just like to focus on the concept of truth, which is a big part of our witness to this way, and how we speak truth in a world filled with so many competing voices. I will speak of the truth in a way suggested by Anthony DeMello, the Jesuit who said, "The shortest distance between a human being and Truth is a story."

The sign in the front yard read, "Talking Dog for Sale." A prospective buyer asked to see the dog. The owner sent him to the backyard, where a black Labrador Retriever was sitting on the lawn. "You talk?" the man asked. "Yep," the Lab replied. "So what's your story?" the astonished man replied. The dog told of his amazing undercover career with the CIA, eavesdropping in high places, countless secret missions. The man went back to the owner and asked the price. "Ten bucks," he said. "Really? Are you serious? For a talking dog? Why so cheap?" "Because he's a liar," the owner said. "He never did any of that spy stuff!" (PREACHING RESOURCES, July 9, 2006, p. 3)

In a world known for truthiness and political spin, truth is difficult to find. There often seems to be a lot of shouting, condemning and excommunicating when any truth gets spoken. I tend to agree with Paul

Tillich, who said “Distrust every claim for truth where you do not see truth united with love; and be certain that you are of the truth and that the truth has taken hold of you and has started to make you free from yourselves.” When we attempt to speak that truth we want to do so in love, and with modesty, reverence and silence. It too often seems that the person who has the least to say shouts the loudest. None of this serves real truth.

Truth without grace is cold and empty. But grace without truth is shapeless – all fluff and no stuff.

Rita Snowden tells a story from World War II. In France, some soldiers brought the body of a dead comrade to a cemetery to have him buried. The priest gently asked whether their friend had been a baptized Catholic. The soldiers answered no. The priest sadly informed them that in that case, he could not permit burial in the churchyard.

So the soldiers dug a grave just outside the cemetery fence. And they laid their comrade to rest. The next day the soldiers came back to add some flowers – only to discover that the grave was nowhere to be found.

Bewildered, they were about to leave when the priest came up to speak to them. It seems that he could not sleep the night before, so troubled was he by his refusal to bury the soldier in the parish cemetery. So early in the morning he left his bed, and with his own hands, he moved the fence – in order to include the body of the soldier.

The reality is that truth demands that we build some fences. But grace demands that the shape of those fences be flexible enough to deal with real people in real life. (Adapted from HOMILETICS, May-June 2—4, p. 24). That’s what Catholic dogma does. It gives us fences, or parameters within which we are to operate. But we need to understand them with love, and apply them with enough flexibility to deal with their deepest truth -- and not just a shallow reading of them. Pope Francis repeatedly uses the phrase ‘accompaniment.’ We are to accompany people where they are, and lovingly invite them to journey further into the truth that is Christ.

Mark Twain was once riding a train home from Maine after 3 weeks of highly successful fishing – even though the state’s fishing season was closed. He bragged about his huge but illegal catch to the only other passenger in the club car. The passenger grew increasingly glum during Twain’s story. When Twain finally asked him who he was, the stranger explained he was the state game warden.

‘Who are you?’ the warden asked.

“To tell the truth,” Twain said, “I’m the biggest liar in the whole United States.” (ME, THE ME I WANT TO BE, Ortberg, p. 133)

Third, because our Catholic faith deals with Jesus, who is the Way, Truth and Life, we simply must deal with truth. But the problem is that the truth of which we speak is God, and as St. Augustine said “The one who speaks of God lies.” We can never get at the whole truth of God. It is simply beyond our human comprehension. So modesty and humility are demanded by any conversations of such great mystery, about truth. It has been said “Those who know, do not say; those who say, do not know.” Most of what theologians have said about God is more about who God is NOT, rather than who God IS. God cannot be put into words, into a formula. That isn’t the truth. That isn’t reality. Reality cannot be put into a formula. Our theology can only point out our errors. When we drop our errors, we come CLOSER to the truth. But we’re still not at the truth. This is common teaching among the great Catholic mystics. Thomas Aquinas, toward the end of his life,

wouldn't write and wouldn't talk; he had seen. I had thought he kept that famous silence of his for only a couple of months, but it went on for years. He realized he had made a fool of himself, and he said so explicitly.

It's as if we have never tasted a green mango and you ask me, "What does it taste like?" I'd say to you, "Sour," but in giving you a word, I've put you off the track. Try to understand that. Most people would seize upon the word – upon the words of scripture for example – and they get it all wrong. "Sour," I say, and you might ask: "Sour like vinegar, sour like a lemon??" No, not sour like a lemon, but sour like a mango. "But I never tasted one," you say. Too bad! But you go ahead and write a doctoral thesis on it. You wouldn't have if you had tasted it. Really. You'd have written a doctoral thesis on other things, but not on mangoes. And the day you finally taste a green mango, you would say, "Oh my, I made a huge fool of myself. I shouldn't have written that thesis." That's exactly what Thomas Aquinas did. And he was considered one of the greatest theologians of all time. Maybe we should remember that when we get into religious arguments. Thomas Aquinas went silent. Maybe we should too. (This adapted from AWARENESS, Anthony DeMello, p. 99-101) Galileo's discoveries did nothing whatsoever to change the nature of God; they threatened only humankind's rigid ideas of the nature of God, their too small understanding of real, big truth. We must constantly be open to new revelation and deeper truth, which is another way of hearing God, with loving obedience. And then the humility to say, "I really don't know."

One more story. We've all told white lies. This one had quite a run! Alice Grayson was to bake a cake for the Baptist Church Ladies' group bake sale in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, but she forgot to do it until the last minute. She remembered it the morning of the bake sale and after rummaging through cabinets she found an angel food cake mix and quickly made it while drying her hair and dressing and helping her son Bryan pack up for Scout Camp. But when Alice took the cake from the oven, the center had dropped flat, and the cake was horribly disfigured.

She said, "Oh dear, there's no time to bake another cake." This cake was so important to Alice because she had just joined a new church and wanted to fit in at her new community of friends. So, being inventive, she looked around the house for something to build up the center of the cake. Alice found it in the bathroom – a roll of toilet paper! She plunked it in and then covered it with icing. Not only did the finished product look beautiful – it looked perfect!

Before she left the house to drop the cake by the church and head for work, Alice woke her daughter Amanda and gave her some money and specific instructions to be at the bake sale the minute it opened at 9:30, and to buy that cake and bring it home. When the daughter arrived at the sale, she found that the attractive, perfect cake had already been sold. Amanda grabbed her cell phone and called her Mom. Alice was horrified. She was beside herself. Everyone would know; what would they think? Oh, how she wailed! She would be ostracized, talked about, ridiculed.

All night Alice lay in bed thinking about people pointing their fingers at her and talking about her behind her back. The next day, Alice promised herself that she would try not to think about the cake, and she would attend the fancy luncheon/bridal shower at the home of a friend of a friend and try to have a good time. Alice did not really want to attend because the hostess was a snob who more than once had looked down her nose at the fact that Alice was a single parent and not from the founding families of Tuscaloosa, but having already RSVP'd she could not think of a believable excuse to stay home.

The meal was elegant, the company was definitely upper crust Old South....and to Alice's horror, the CAKE – HER CAKE – was presented for dessert. Alice felt the blood drain from her body when she saw the

cake, and she started out of her chair to rush to tell her hostess all about it, but before she could get to her feet, the Mayor's wife said, "What a beautiful cake!" Alice, who was still stunned, sat back in her chair when she heard the hostess (who was a prominent member of the church) say, "Thank you – I baked it myself."

Alice smiled and thought to herself, "God is sooo good!"

Now THAT'S THE TRUTH! (Story from an email, 8 Sept, 2006)

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