

Love Means Not Withholding the Truth



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Like most people, I don't like going to the dentist. And if we consider the measure of discomfort that is inflicted on us when we do go, then we realize it is only because we know we are receiving a lot more good in return and avoiding even greater discomfort that could come in the future. That's why we thank dentists rather than call them mean.

It's the classic "double effect." A good (or neutral) action brings about both a good and bad result. We only intend the good result, which does not come from the bad result, but merely together with it. In these cases, it is OK, even praiseworthy, to perform the action. Love itself sometimes brings about a double effect, especially when it comes to telling the truth. Jesus certainly did not intend to drive away his followers. Yet that's exactly what happened when he told them the truth about the Eucharist. We read in John's Gospel: Jesus said to them,

"I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. . . . He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" . . . From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the twelve. (Jn 6:53, 59-60, 66-67)

It is often pointed out in commentary on this passage how far Jesus was willing to go in accepting the consequences of telling the truth. He was even willing to let the twelve depart and to have to start all over again in choosing his apostles. Obviously, our Lord was not a "peace at any price" kind of guy. He was not afraid to rock the boat. He did not seek unity at the expense of truth, but only unity in the truth. He was not trying to attract followers by withholding the truth from them and making discipleship seem easier than it actually would be; rather, he respected his listeners enough to lay out for them the full demands of following him, and to give them the opportunity to grow, to stretch, to be transformed as they accepted those demands. And that's why "loving" means not withholding the truth.

Truth is very much like food. We need it. Without it, we cannot grow, or even survive, as human beings and as a human community. We are made for the truth, to always receive more of it, to contemplate it, to find our fulfillment in it. And this is easy to understand when we realize that God not only gives us truth, as one of his greatest gifts, but he is truth. "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6). And that truth leads to another great gift and human need: freedom. "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:31).

Love gives the beloved what he needs, even when there is some pain involved in receiving it. Hence parents bring their children to the dentist, no matter how much the children may protest. In my ministry to priests as director of Priests for Life, I often give seminars about how to preach

and counsel parishioners on some of the most contentious moral issues of the day. In the midst of this, I often address the relationship between compassion and truth. Many clergy and lay counselors see these two goods as being in competition with each other. They want their people to grow, but they want them to know that God loves them, here and now, just as they are. Indeed, God loves us just the way we are, but he loves us too much to leave us the way we are. Love calls us to change. To be compassionate, therefore, means we both perceive and provide what the person needs, and therefore we give them the truth that leads to conversion. At the same time, to bear witness to the fullness of truth means to bear witness to compassion, because if we do not see God as boundless compassion and mercy, then we are missing the full truth about him. One does not have to balance being compassionate and being truthful. One does not have to “shift gears” between being pastoral and being prophetic. They are all part of the same dynamic, two sides of the same coin: namely, loving people.

An Example from Scripture

Two passages, one from Scripture and one from the magisterium, make this point clear. Paul writes to the Ephesians:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Eph 4:11-16)

In this passage is the familiar phrase “speaking the truth in love,” which is the theme on which we are reflecting. But to appreciate the meaning of that phrase, the whole context of the passage is essential. Notice that it's about the Body of Christ—all of us—growing to a strong maturity so that we can do the work, the service, God has appointed us to do. Without embracing the fullness of truth, we're like infants who can easily be led astray by anything that masquerades as truth. If that happens, we can't serve God's people, because we won't necessarily understand what is good for them in the first place.

The image of the body in this passage also shows us that when we share the truth of Christ, we are not talking about disconnected truths, but rather an integral person. The various truths of Christ are not like books in a library, where one may decide to check out whatever books one wants, and leave the rest behind, or where the library itself may choose to exclude some books from its collection. The biblical image, instead, is a living body. All the parts are, as Paul says, “joined and held together by every supporting ligament.” You can't pick and choose which parts of the body should be there. When you accept the person, you accept the whole body. You can't eliminate a finger without the head complaining. What you do to one part of the body affects the whole body. So with the truth of Christ, the reason we cannot withhold any part of it is because

by doing so, we affect all the rest of it. All the truths are an integral unity; they are a living Body, Christ himself.

Imagine going to Communion and, when the priest says, “the body of Christ,” you say, “Amen, except for this piece,” and then break off a segment of the host and give it back. That’s what it’s like when we say we accept all the teachings of Christ except the ones we don’t like. By the same token, that’s what it’s like when we offer to others only those aspects of the teachings of Christ that we think our hearers are going to like.

Love not only demands we omit nothing from the truth, but that love communicate that truth in a particular way. To communicate the truth in love takes more than following a set of dos and don’ts, or of choosing the right words or tone of voice. Something has to happen within ourselves before we do or say anything: We have to realize that we are speaking to our brothers and sisters, that we are all on the same side. People need to know that. A discussion of the truth, whether in private or public, should acknowledge the pain that people may feel about the issue we are discussing. The psychological attitude to take and to convey is, “We are in this painful situation together and need to help each other out of it.” If the person reacts angrily, we should approach in the way we would care for those afflicted by personal disasters. We are dealing with good people who have pain, not with enemies.

Wrestle with God

Speaking the truth in love can be seen when we don’t just speak at people, but, like the Lord, bring them into the process of discovering the truth. We don’t just serve up conclusions; we respect their mind and heart and will to engage and wrestle with the truth. All of us are called to wrestle with God, just as in that mysterious passage from Genesis 32 where Jacob wrestled all night with the Lord. Jacob was injured in the process but blessed with a deeper knowledge of God and of himself. Sharing the full truth, in content and in method, trusts the readiness of others to accept it, and that very process, rather than silence or a dilution of or apology for the truth, is what shows the love.

Moreover, though we often are tempted to think that our hearers are not ready to hear the full truth, we also have to consider the fact that the Word of God, living and active as it is, in fact makes them ready, just as the word preached by Ezekiel (ch. 37) brought the dry bones to life.

Some will react angrily when truth is spoken, no matter how well we speak it. In all my preaching on abortion, however, I can still count on one hand the number of those who came to me angry because of a pro-life homily. The best way to approach them, using the attitude described earlier, is to gently ask questions so as to draw out of them the cause for their anger and help them think about it. I invite them to sit down in an out-of-the-way place to talk calmly. Some will do that, others will leave. But it is much harder to criticize or be angry with someone who wants to listen to you than with someone who lectures you or responds with anger. Let them know that you are listening, that you know their pain, and that the message of respect for life which you will steadfastly preach also says that their life is precious, too, no matter what they disagree with.

In a sense, our readiness to share the whole truth in love is analogous to our readiness to introduce ourselves. We should not be afraid of who we are. We should trust the other person's ability to accept us and have a strong enough sense of our own worth to be OK if they reject us. That is not only truth and love. That is freedom.