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Folks like the truth that hits their neighbor.

I GREW UP HEARING Aesop's "Honesty is the best policy," so I found this American proverb, which shows honesty as sometimes less than a virtue, an interesting surprise.

And yet, all virtues have the potential to be vices. For example, Lewis described the fine line between humility and pride in *The Screwtape Letters*, a fictional conversation between two devils. Screwtape, the teacher, says to Wormwood, his pupil:

Catch him at the moment when he is really poor in spirit and smuggle into his mind the gratifying reflection, "By jove! I'm being humble", and almost immediately pride—pride at his own humility—will appear. (69)

The idea that truth telling is always a virtue opens the door to pride as well, to the self-righteous honesty that wounds others.

Jesus, who certainly was a truth teller, was selective in the times he practiced it. One good example of that is when the “mother of the sons of Zebedee” came before him kneeling and asking, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom” (NRSV Matt. 20:21).

Now the obvious truth here is that she was being presumptuous. Certainly the other disciples appeared to be upset by such brazen ambition. But Jesus didn’t say to her, “Woman, you presume too much. Your sons will never be ready for such an elevation.”

More gently he said to her, “You do not know what you are asking.” But the two sons pressed on saying, “We are able.” This response might again have been a time for truth telling, but Jesus continued to be merciful, replying that such a privilege “is not mine to grant” (23). Much later, this woman was loyally standing at the cross with Mary Magdalene. It is hard to imagine this mother being there if Jesus had handled the earlier conversation about her sons with less love and more honesty.

Another time when Jesus tempered his words was when the woman accused of adultery was brought to him. Jesus didn’t say to her accusers, “You are all sinners, doing this very thing. Why single her out and accuse her?” That would have been the truth. Instead he said, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (NRSV John 8:7). And then, instead of staring them accusingly in the eye, he humbly “bent down and wrote on the ground” —not watching the effect of his words at all.

TURNING ASIDE TO SEE

The self-righteousness that hides in honesty can be tragically hurtful to those around us. It may even be a disguise for judgment and anger and revenge. That's why a time of truth telling must be a time of yielding, when the Lord leads the way. Only then will our motives truly spring from love.