

Homily for Easter VII, 2018

May 13, 2018

Why does Jesus think it's important to pray that we be "consecrated in truth"? He has in mind much more than just that lying is wrong. He wants to save us from chaos and from all the destruction that a chaotic life brings.

We know people whose lives are a mess – maybe it's our own life, or parts of it. We see messes all around us, in the drug epidemic, in failed marriages, in beat-up roads, in crazy health-insurance bureaucracy; and sometimes the messes tip over into genuine evil: people mistreated in nursing homes, violence in streets and schools, and all the things that fill the news. Evil gets a foothold where there's mess instead of an orderly way of life.

The sad truth about what our tradition calls "original sin" can be translated as this: Without continual care, things break down. The order we create – establishing a family, keeping a school environment healthy and bullying-free, fixing our houses, paving our roads, caring for those we love, trying to govern ourselves peacefully and wisely as a society: whatever order we create tends toward breakdown unless we give it regular attention and care. Roofs begin to leak, roads develop potholes, bullies go uncorrected, and relationships grow cold and people drift apart. Our experiment in self-government becomes corrupted by people out for their own gain. Things break down without continual, regular, attentive, wise care.

Jesus did not want that for His disciples or His church; He wanted joyful lives for them, in a peaceful, restored creation. He knew that lying was poison to that peace and that joy, in relationships and among neighbors. Truth-telling had to become the bedrock of his disciples' and His message's survival. That's why He prayed so earnestly for it: "Consecrate them in truth."

And he recognized that they would have to resist consciously what was around them in order to live "in truth." "They do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world." The disorder we see around us can easily incline us to give ourselves permission to allow a bit of disorder into our own lives: to cheat, to indulge ourselves – to lie not so much by our words as by our actions.

When we allow even a bit of this chaos into our lives, it doesn't stay isolated. Like a drop of poison in water, the lie spreads its effects. Self-indulgent actions poison our speech, as we try to cover them up to avoid the shame we feel. Self-indulgent actions give permission to others to act similarly, either by setting a too-low bar of expectations, or – when we hurt others, as lying actions inevitably will – by encouraging resentment or even retribution. Lives, families, and societies ratchet down into disorder and unnecessary suffering.

So two things to take home from Jesus' teaching today:

First, there is no such thing as a "little" lie: every lie is poison, and the effects of even a "little" lie can't be predicted or contained.

Second, this poison is at the root of the disorder, suffering, and even violence we see around us. The lies of the past have created the suffering and violence of the present. Today's lies set

us up for the suffering and violence of tomorrow. To set our families, our neighborhoods, and our own lives into right order requires a firm, constant rejection of lying in ourselves and in every other person. Every lie breaks down the fabric of our community; thus Jesus' heartfelt prayer for his friends, that His Father "consecrate them in truth."