

Did you know that 23% of us lie to our doctors? And even if we are not in that group that baldly lies to them, well over half of us withhold information from them that might help them treat our health. According to a survey by the life insurance company TermLife2Go, of those who do not tell the full truth to their doctors:

- 46% lie about smoking or other substances,
- 43% lie about exercise (or its lack),
- 38% lie about alcohol, and
- 29% of us lie about our love life.

You will note that the total of those figures exceeds 100%. That's because we lie about several of these at the same time. Bizarrely, the thing we lie the most about to our doctors is how well we follow the very treatments they prescribe. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University looked at how patients with breathing problems used an inhaler that recorded the date and time of its use. 73% said they used it three times each day. The truth: only 15% did. Furthermore, 14% emptied their inhalers before their appointment to make it look like they were good patients. Why would any of us not reveal the full truth about our health to the people we make appointments with and even pay to help us get or stay healthy? Is it guilt? Is it shame? Is it to avoid a sermon? Whatever it is, it's apparently more important to us than dying.

In today's reading from John's first general letter to the church communities he founded, John consistently uses imagery about light and darkness. He says, "This is the message that we heard from [Christ] and proclaim to you: God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all (1:5)." He then talks about "walking in darkness"—which is bad—as opposed to "walking in the light"—which is good. If we were raised as children in churches that stressed the importance of correct moral behavior, when we hear John say these things we are likely to interpret him to mean that whenever we misbehave in any way, we step away

from God into darkness; therefore, as that thinking goes, if we want to stay close to God we must stay in the light by striving relentlessly to be good. I wonder how many church communities—in any denomination—reinforce this message not only with their children but also their adults? When people come to church, do they hear primarily—or even exclusively—exhortations or judgements for or against personal, cultural, or even political values and behaviors as if their walk with God depends solely upon them? If so, would it be a surprise if the people who come to those churches looking for spiritual and emotional healing end up feeling even worse? Like patients who lie to their doctors so they can look like good patients but, by doing so, actually endanger their health, how many of us in churches feel so pressured to follow or to resist moral, cultural, or political behaviors that we end up getting spiritually or emotionally sick?

The truth is that John's letter does not offer any moral, behavioral prescriptions at all: John simply wants us to look at ourselves and our situation honestly—no matter how painful, broken, or destructive our situation may be—and then to turn to God in Christ for help. John's word for the thing that causes pain, brokenness, and destruction is *hamartia*: the kind of total, systemic, and even existential failure that comes from self-centeredness—it is also called "sin." Self-centeredness, which seems to be our chronic, underlying condition, is what makes us strangers to our sanity and exiles from social harmony. *Hamartia* is the irrational mindset and heart-set that explains why we hurt ourselves and others whom we are born to love. John declares that *hamartia* afflicts all of us, and he passionately proclaims that our healing cannot begin until we acknowledge that truth. When we have the grace and courage to face this truth and admit that we need help, then we walk in the light. When we see that we need to be rescued and when we yearn for someone to rescue us, that is when we become open to seeing Christ as our Rescuer. But when we do not face this truth, when we insist that we do not need help either because there is nothing wrong in our life or because,

if there is, we can handle it on our own, then we walk obscured in darkness: we do not see the truth about ourselves. Or maybe we see it but are too afraid or proud to admit it. Or, perhaps worst of all, maybe we see it but despair that there is no help to be found. This is why John says, “if we say that we have no *hamartia*, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our *hamartia*, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our *hamartia* and cleanse us (1:8-9).” Healing begins with truth, no matter how difficult the truth may be. In fact, sometimes when we surrender the lies about ourselves that we tell ourselves and others, it may feel like we are dying. But where there is truth, there is God; and where there is God, there is love, because God is love.

In 1995’s film *Dead Man Walking*, actor Sean Penn plays Matthew Poncelet who, with an accomplice, has been convicted of murdering a young couple while they were on an innocent date; Poncelet awaits his imminent execution in the Louisiana State Penitentiary in the West Feliciana Parish of Louisiana. Arising from the real-life work done by Sister Helen Prejean, a Roman Catholic nun, the film tells the story of how Sister Helen, played by Sarah Sarandon, ministers to Poncelet in his final days and tries to help him face the truth about his situation and find God’s love when Poncelet needs it the most—whether he knows it or not. Throughout his trial, sentencing, and imprisonment, Poncelet has insisted to everyone, including Sister Helen, that he is not guilty of the crimes for which he is charged. To everyone and to her he consistently blames countless others for what has gone wrong. But with only hours to spare, he responds to a crisis question from Sister Helen:

*What about Matthew Poncelet? Where’s he in this story? What, is he just an innocent? A victim?*

Surprisingly stricken, he replies “I ain’t no victim” and then breaks away to call his mother. When they reunite, he admits to sister Helen his terrible crimes. His mother always insisted that Poncelet accomplice was responsible for everything wrong that happened that

night, but on that call he told her that he would no longer accept the role of a victim: regardless of who did what, come what may, he was responsible for what had happened. “You know,” he tells Sister Helen, “I never had no real love myself. Never loved a woman or anybody else myself much good. Well, it figures I’d have to die to find love. Thank you for loving me.” And so, several moments later, as Poncelet is sequestered and strapped down in solitude and the lethal injection fluid enters his body, Poncelet sees Sister Helen through the window as she sits beside the families of the ones no longer alive because of him. The last thing he sees is her, separated only by transparent glass, look into his eyes and say over and over, “I love you. I love you. I love you.”

The only way to walk in the light of God’s love is to face and accept the truth. Ultimately, we are not victims. Ultimately, we are responsible for everything that we have done. And ultimately, we need the kind of help that we can never find within ourselves alone. The good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that God’s love for us depends not upon whatever we have done in the past nor what we are doing now nor what we can ever do in the future but solely on what He has already done for us. For the love of us broken sinners, He died on the Cross and is Risen from the Dead. For no reason other than His abundant love for us, He offers us absolution, resurrection, and freedom from every lie we have ever heard about us or told ourselves. That false self, which would otherwise kill us, has died; our true self, the God has always seen even when we have not, is rising from its grave. And all the while, God looks at us and repeats to us over and over, “I love you. I love you. I love you.”