At the end of my first semester of seminary, all the Episcopalians preparing for ordination in my class were asked by our Dean to write an essay titled “This I Believe,” which we would read aloud to one another as part of our final colloquium. The prompt was actually borrowed from NPR: “compose a brief piece about a personal belief that is near and dear to your heart.” Our Dean was very clear that this was not a theological exercise. He did not want to listen to fifteen re-articulations of the Nicene Creed. When the day finally came, he kicked things off by reading one of his favorite essays from NPR called “I Believe in Going to the Funeral.” I remember one hilarious piece from a classmate titled, “I Believe in Singing in the Car,” and another surprisingly moving one, “I Believe in Tipping the Pizza Guy.”

When my turn came, I read my title aloud, “I Believe in Telling the Truth.” To be honest, telling the truth did not always come easily to me. As a child, I looked around and saw a lot of lip service given to honesty but very few people actually practicing it. Politicians, celebrities, businesspeople, even the adults in the community I grew up in – most seemed far more concerned with seeming right, or with what other people thought of them, than with being real. From my family, though no one would have said this, I learned that the truth was often a liability, and that at the very least certain things (like one’s accomplishments) really ought to be exaggerated, while others (like one’s fears, feelings, and failures) were best minimized if not omitted entirely.

But by the time I got to college, I realized that the people I most respected and enjoyed were all, essentially, honest. Someone asked them what happened and, even if made them look silly or underprepared or ignorant, they narrated the facts. Someone asked them how they felt, and they described their emotional state. Some asked if they wanted to do something and their said yes if they did and no if they didn’t. I found this odd at first, unsettling, but, eventually, incredibly compelling. These people were not perfect – far from it – but they were not ashamed of their imperfections, which is another way of saying they were not ashamed of being human.
So in my early 20s, I took up honesty as a spiritual discipline. I wouldn’t have been able to quote the First Letter of John then – “let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” – but I realized (painfully, slowly) that my capacity to love and know God and others, and to be loved and known by God and others, was impoverished when I was not radically rooted in the truth. People don’t talk much about the discipline of our virtues, at least on a practical level, so I’ll share what I actually did: every night, I committed to looking back on the day that had passed, and if I hadn’t acted or spoken with integrity, or had exaggerated or minimized something to make myself look better, I told on myself the next day. I asked a core group of friends and family I trusted if they would help hold me accountable, forgive my awkwardness, and encourage me. And, slowly, being a more honest and open person became easier and easier, and I began to feel something I’d never felt before: a certain kind of wholeness and freedom, like my skin fit, like people actually knew me. Like I actually knew myself. And then other things shifted: my actions more easily aligned with my values, my capacity to recognize the truth of others became more refined, and, perhaps most surprising, I became more forgiving, feeling a great deal of compassionate for those who were not safe, secure, or supported enough to engage a discipline like this.

We tend to think of moral exemplars – Mother Theresa, Ghandi, the saints, Jesus – as really far off and refined. Perfect in an almost inhuman way. In today’s Gospel, for example, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd” who “lays down his life for the sheep.” He is perfectly known by God and knows God perfectly in return. It seems so … lofty. So intense. A love that calls for a complete giving away of the self. As Christians we talk a lot about following Jesus, but the sacrifice and commitment of these kinds of declarations can be intimidating, or even discouraging.

I can’t help but wonder, though, if Jesus didn’t take baby steps from Mary and Joseph’s living room to becoming the good shepherd. If he wasn’t, like all of us, faced with an infinite number of choices moment by moment, day by day, year by year, that prepared him slowly, painfully, for such self-giving love. If he didn’t stumble into his fate and his future, not unlike each of us. Perhaps this is precisely what it means to love in truth and action: to be transformed on the way into the one God created us to be; to let our love flow from the deep well of love that is God. This makes sense to me not only because of my own experience, but because of some fascinating research about the opposite of honesty: lying.
I recently heard an interview with Dan Ariely, a professor of psychology and behavioral economics at Duke University, and author of *The Honest Truth About Dishonesty*.\(^1\) In his research on dishonesty, he spent time with notorious criminals to understand how they ended up where they did, noting that most people think of robbers, drug dealers, and murders as fundamentally different kinds of people. But he found that – troublingly - not to be the case. He offers an instructive example of a middle-aged man who a former professional cyclist.

As the result of an injury and some major life changes, he decided to take a break from cycling for a few months, but when things calmed down a bit he was eager to return. He started training on his own and then reconnected with his old team, going out for his first group ride in months. It was … it was … pretty embarrassing. Having been one of the stronger performers before his sabbatical, he struggled to keep up with his friends and was extremely frustrated by the end of the ride. Seeing his distress and wanting to help, one of his friends gave him the name of a doctor, whom he went to see a few days later. The doctor prescribed a medication that increases the production of red blood cells. It was developed for cancer patients but had become popular with athletes. After all, more red blood cells mean more oxygen, which means better performance.

The man filled the prescription at his local pharmacy and began taking it as prescribed. He saw dramatic improvements in his cycling and returned to competing. He didn’t think of himself as cheating – after all, he got the medicine from his doctor, and both the visit and pills had been covered by his insurance. But a year or so later, he was troubled to learn that this drug was being banned in the U.S. Many of his teammates, who also took it, began talking about other ways to acquire it. The man eventually found a supplier in China and began importing the drug for his use. His friends asked him to get some of it for them, so he increased his order, and soon other cyclists in his area had also put in requests. Within a few months, he was providing medication for dozens, and then hundreds, of others. At this point, he had become, technically, a drug dealer, smuggling a banned substance across international borders and supplying a large network of users, which is precisely what landed him in prison.

It all started with such tiny, justifiable actions. As Ariely points out, deception is a slippery slope. Why? Because almost none of us are, actually, perfectly honest. Research on

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dishonesty shows that nearly everyone is capable of justifying small infractions, stretching the rules just a little: that there’s a window of a few miles above the speed limit within which we don’t really feel like we’re speeding; there’s a tiny margin of error when completing our taxes within which we don’t worry too much about fudging the numbers. As Michelle Alexander, author of The New Jim Crow, says nearly every time she speaks, “we are all criminals.” It is, indeed, our unwillingness to admit and acknowledge our propensity for falsehood that keeps us stuck in it and enables us to so dramatically “other” those criminals who end up getting caught.

As a behavioral economist, though, Ariely is not so concerned with the question, “why do we lie?” but with this question: “why don’t we lie more?” The answer, if there is one, is complex, but seems to come down to our being essentially social creatures. Our society celebrates the virtue of honesty and so we do, genuinely, want to be honest, or at least to think of ourselves as honest. A people of truth and action, perhaps. And because we evolved to need one another, and honesty correlates with dependability, it is an important consideration in the flourishing of relationships and communities.

Deception can be a slippery slope, but it turns out that honesty is, too. And if we are willing to give it a try – to really make a concerted commitment to this practice – we might find ourselves stumbling into a fate and future that is more genuine, more generous, and more generative than we could have imagined. It’s important to remember this in an age of false news and alternative facts. It’s important to remember that as people of faith we not only believe in truth, but in capital T truth: a truth that grounds reality, around which our lives, and the universe, are ultimately oriented.

There’s a truism popular in some idealistic communities that goes something like this: “dying for something is easy – its living for something that’s hard.” With Easter so recently behind us, it’s easy to hear Jesus saying that he “lays down his life for the sheep” as code for his willingness to die for humanity. A shorthand for the cross. But today’s Gospel doesn’t actually say that. Jesus never says he dies for the sheep. Instead, he says simply that he lays down his life for us: offers his life, lets go of everything that would get in the way, giving freely and lavishly. Because he loves us. For Jesus, this did eventually mean dying for the well-being, safety, and flourishing of all people, but first it meant living for them, and, incredibly, it continues to mean living for us, not in word and speech only, but in truth and action.
I wonder where we would have found the Good Shepherd last Friday, as thousands of young, vulnerable students walked out of their classrooms to protest the rampant gun violence ravaging our society, endangering our children and our neighbors. I wonder where we would find the Good Shepherd in the ongoing waves of disclosures of sexual violence and harassment that continue to rock our communities. I wonder where we would find the Good Shepherd in this era of mass incarceration, opioid addiction, religious extremism, environmental change, and refugee displacements.

Don’t look only to the cross or to the tomb. You won’t find him there. Look where people are laying down their lives for the vulnerable and oppressed. Where people are freely choosing to love lavishly, sacrificially, radically, allowing the needs of others to impinge on their comfort and status. Look where people are loving in truth and action, stumbling into a fate and future that is not of our own making, word by word, moment by moment, choice by choice. And then turn your focus inward and listen for the voice calling us each by name, saying, “Come, and follow.” Amen.