

## Actions speak louder

Matthew 21:28-32

April 13, 2008

*There was a man who had two sons. One day he asked one of the boys to clean out the garage. "No way! I don't want to," the son replied. But later, he changed his mind and did it.*

*That same day the father asked his other son to mow the lawn. He said, "You bet! I'd be glad to do it." But he never did.*

Now, what do you think? Which one of the two sons did what his father wanted?

Did you have to think hard about that one? The answer is obvious! The first one, of course. The one who didn't just say he would do the job, but actually did it. The meaning of Jesus' parable is simple and unambiguous: actions speak louder than words.

The parable of the two sons is not mysterious or shocking or difficult. It does not reveal many layers of meaning or invite different lines of interpretation like so many of Jesus' other parables do. It is not puzzling.

Not puzzling like the parable of the wedding feast. None of the invited guests are willing to come, so the host brings in everybody and anybody off the streets to share in the celebration, no questions asked, no qualifications necessary. But then he finds a guest not wearing wedding clothes ... and throws him out.

Huh?

Not many-layered like the parable of the fine pearl. A man looking for pearls finds one that is unusually fine, so he goes and sells everything he has to buy that pearl.

It's a simple enough parable, but it raises as many questions as it answers. What makes the kingdom of God so desirable, so valuable? Does Jesus expect his followers to give away everything they own for the sake of the kingdom ... literally? What do people filled with passion for God's kingdom look like and what do they do?

But the meaning of the parable of the two sons is simple and clear and indisputable. And that's the point. Jesus addresses this parable to a particular audience, to the priests and Pharisees who have come to the Temple to challenge him. He wants them to be perfectly clear about the meaning of his story, and perfectly aware that he is talking about them.

The difficulty with this parable is not understanding it, but applying it, connecting it to our own experience, thinking about who is that Jesus is talking about. As I asked the members of our Wednesday night Bible study group: Who are the contemporary equivalents to the priests and Pharisees? Who among us is like the second son?

Now I'll tell you exactly what I wanted to do with this sermon, exactly how I wanted to answer that question. I wanted to point out for you all the modern day Pharisees (in my humble opinion!), all those people, those Christians, who are all talk and no substance. I wanted to expose their hypocrisy, to call them on the shallowness of their faith!

But I won't. I can't. Not if I want to take Jesus seriously. His parable is addressed personally, not generally. He intends his listeners -- the priests and Pharisees -- to recognize themselves in the story -- which they do -- not to speculate about who it is who might fit the type of the disobedient son, who it is whose actions do not match their words.

Jesus intends his listeners -- us -- to recognize ourselves in the story. How are my words just empty speech? How is our worship just hollow ritual? In what ways is my faith all smoke and little fire? In what ways is our claim to be followers of Jesus -- obedient and eager followers of Jesus' way -- a sham?

Jesus said they hadn't really listened to John the Baptist. They hadn't believed him when he said: *Do those things that will show that you have turned from your sins.*

Do those things that will show that you have turned from your sins. If you're a tax collector, don't charge extra for your own gain. If you're a soldier, don't abuse your power. If you have enough to eat and enough to clothe yourself, share with someone who doesn't. If you've caused hurt, do what it takes to make it right. If you've been hurt, offer forgiveness.

If you do love God, don't just say it, show it! Show it by putting God first in your life, before everything and everyone else. Show it by carefully listening, carefully studying, carefully nurturing the relationship, carefully doing the things God calls you to do. Actions speak louder.

If you do love your neighbor, don't just say it, show it! Show it by making yourself aware of what is going on in your neighbor's life. Show it by listening and empathizing and offering support. Show it by lending a hand, by spending time with lonely people, by standing up for helpless people, by giving voice to voiceless people, by advocating on behalf of people who have less money and less power than you. Actions speak louder.

Actions speak louder than words. It is so important for us to remember that, because we live in a time when our words may be used as weapons against us, when just a few words may be used to judge or dismiss or denounce an entire career, an entire life. That is just what has happened to one of my colleagues, a member of our church, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, recently retired pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago.

You have undoubtedly heard the news stories or seen some of the video clips: Jeremiah Wright standing in the pulpit saying, "God damn America!" For those few words and for a few others that have been excerpted from thirty-six years worth of sermons, he has been judged and vilified and denounced as unpatriotic and a hater.

It is surely unfair to lift a single phrase or a few short paragraphs from their broader context. If you were to listen to the entire sermon from which those words came, you might better appreciate what Rev. Wright was trying to say about our country and what he was not trying to say. You might not, but you might.

And it is surely uncharitable to ignore the cultural context from which and to which he speaks, a context very different from our own. We don't know what life looks like from the underside. We who are white cannot begin to understand what it is like to be a person of color in America. And the style and substance and heritage of African-American worship is probably like a foreign language to most of us.

But even taking his words at face value, out of context, we have to remember: actions speak louder.

The man we deem unpatriotic heard John Kennedy's famous words in 1961: *Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country ...* and he did. He gave up his student deferment and joined the Marines where he completed a two-year tour of duty. At the end of the two years, he became a Navy corpsman, serving his country another four years, while earning numerous distinctions and commendations.

Jeremiah Wright then completed his college and seminary education and went on to assume pastoral duties at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, a church then of eighty-seven members.

That same church now has over 8,000 members. It is a most wealthy and most successful church, but has intentionally remained rooted in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Chicago. Its website lists fifty-nine different ministries of the church, including support for cancer survivors, career development, counseling ministries, dance ministries, ministry for victims of domestic violence, drug and alcohol recovery programs, grief ministry, girl scouts, work with individuals and families impacted by HIV/AIDS, support for married couples seeking to build and maintain Christian homes, tutoring programs in math and reading, a elementary school mentoring program, a prison ministry, and forty-six more ministries!

Actions speak louder!

The congregation holds education in high esteem and has sixty members currently enrolled in seminaries, earning masters degrees and preparing for Christian ministry, while their tuition costs are fully paid by the church.

John Thomas, president and general minister of the United Church of Christ says of the church:

*While the worship is always inspiring, the welcome extravagant, and the preaching biblically based and prophetically challenging, I have been especially moved by the way Trinity ministers to its young people, nurturing them to claim their Christian faith, to celebrate their African-American heritage, and to pursue higher education to prepare themselves for leadership in church and society.*

I was able to witness that for myself three years ago when I attended the Festival of Homiletics held that year in Chicago. On Thursday night, Rev. Wright preached to the nine hundred ministers attending the conference, while a choir of probably sixty to eighty voices provided worship music and two dozen young dancers added a stunning visual layer to our worship.

It was for me a most moving worship experience. The passion and energy and joy and hope and faith of these young folk were palpably visible and highly contagious! I thought to myself: here is a ministry that really does reach young people and give them something to believe in and live for and take pride in, a ministry that crowns them with dignity and honor and purpose.

Actions speak louder!

Does this sound like a church, a pastor, that foments hate? Does this sound like a church, a pastor, that despises America? This is a church, this is a pastor, that are deeply invested in ministries of compassion and hope, that are deeply committed to transforming neighborhood and nation and world through the gospel of Jesus Christ. As political commentator David Gergen said of Jeremiah Wright: *It's not a lack of patriotism. It is a different form of patriotism. Actually, Reverend Wright may love this country more than any of us but feel we've fallen short of what we preach and believe.*

I tell Jeremiah Wright's story as a cautionary tale, to remind us what may happen when we ignore the lessons of Jesus' parable, when we judge a man or a woman solely by their words and not by their actions. Some of Rev. Wright's words may sound offensive to us. Some may be offensive. But actions speak louder. Which one did what his father wanted? Which one did love his country and prod it to live up to its ideals?

When the priests and Pharisees heard Jesus' parable, they knew he was talking to them. They knew he was talking about them. But they may well have failed to understand why he was talking to them.

Who is to say if the father were to come back to that second son tomorrow and ask him again to mow the lawn, who is to say he wouldn't this time say "Yes" ... and do it!

He still has a chance. As long as he lives, and as long as his father lives, he still has a chance to do -- really do -- what his father wants. Tomorrow is for him a new day, a new opportunity, a fresh start!

Today is for you a new day, a new opportunity, a fresh start. It doesn't matter what you say or what you have said. What matters is what you do. Actions speak louder!

So go. Go and do those things that show that you have turned from your sins. Go and do those things that show you do love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength. Go and do those things that show you do love your neighbor, as much as and in the same way as you love yourself.

May your actions, may our actions, speak volumes about the integrity and veracity and real substance of our faith in Jesus Christ.