

“Let Your Life Speak”

Based on John 10:22-30

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Actions speak louder than words. You know how hard that is for a preacher to say? The calling of a preacher is to speak words. To be honest, sometimes I’m tempted to think that my responsibility is to do the talking and let others do the stuff. I wonder if sometimes I focus on preparing my sermons in order to avoid the messy, sometimes sacrificial actions of living out what I talk about. But I don’t think this is only my issue. Don’t we all find it easier to talk about what we are going to do or ought to do, but then fall short on actually doing what we say we will do? As another well known phrase goes, talk is cheap. If you really want to know what someone is about, what they care about, what matters to them, watch what they do instead of paying a lot of attention to what they say. I know from personal experience when my actions fail to live up to what I preach. It isn’t pretty. I sometimes wonder if most of us, me included, would be a lot better off if we talked less and did more. Let our actions speak for themselves and maybe only speak if it’s absolutely necessary. But, then again, someone has to stand up and give the sermon. The gospel message, the things of God, they need to be spoken about. There is a place for speaking plainly about the things of God.

That’s what Jesus’ detractors wanted him to do. They wanted Jesus to speak plainly, to tell them, yes or no, is he the messiah or not. They didn’t need a long speech. They didn’t need a detailed explanation or a bunch of stories and illustrations. They just wanted Jesus to say it, “I am the messiah” or “I am not the messiah.” Just four or five words was all that was necessary.

Jesus was never good at doing what people told him to do, especially if they were not supportive of what he was doing. You ask him a question and he usually responded by asking you a question. You want an answer and he would likely tell you a riddle. When it came to speaking, Jesus would definitely do that, but rarely did he just say what he meant in plain, straightforward language. He often spoke in ways that

caused listeners to have to stop and think about what he was trying to say. And there was often more than one way to understand what he said.

His works, though, were pretty clear. They were works that brought healing, restoration, even new life. They were works that speak to what God is all about, the source of life who heals and restores, who mends what is broken. So Jesus told the detractors he didn't need to tell them anything. Just look at what he does. His works speak for themselves who he is. And if you are open minded enough, clearly these works demonstrate that Jesus is the messiah of God. If you are close minded and so sure that it's not possible that Jesus could be the messiah, then even what he does won't convince you. That's basically what he tells his detractors. If they can't get it by seeing what he does, then no argument or even plain speaking will sway them. But for those who are open to the possibility, then the works speak loudly and clearly about who Jesus is, and what God is all about. Experiencing the things Jesus did make the case better than his stories and riddles.

Cooking shows are great because you get to see how the food is prepared instead of just reading the recipe. Cookbooks with big, glossy pictures of each step in the process are nice but to get to watch someone make the dish from start to finish is even better. They make it look so easy! Even better are these cool videos that you may stumble upon on Facebook. In one minute you watch a speeded up version of two disembodied hands whipping up some amazing dish and you think to yourself, "I can do that!"

Then again, how often do we take what we watch from the cooking show and actually do it? Just watching the food being prepared isn't the same thing as the experience of actually preparing the food yourself. One thing you discover is that doing it yourself isn't as easy as it is on TV or on those videos you see on Facebook. All the veggies were peeled and cut up and all the spices neatly measured and ready to go on the TV show. You have to do all that stuff yourself. It takes more effort to actually make the dish than it takes to watch someone else do it. But, if you put in the effort, following the directions and the guidance of the video, then when it comes out right, what a sense of accomplishment!

It's a fuller, richer experience when you do the work instead of watching someone else do it.

Most of us have gone to seminars where topics are discussed that try to prepare us for dealing with various situations that we may face, either in the work environment or just in our lives. Say for example you have gone to a self-defense class or, what unfortunately has become more and more popular, an active shooter response training, where you learn to run, hide, and fight. When we go to these seminars, we have an instructor with their PowerPoint presentation discussing all kinds of possible scenarios. We may even do some role playing of different ways to respond to various situations. But those are just role plays. It's surely a different thing all together when you have a real life experience, when the person has a real gun firing real bullets in your general direction. It's not pretend anymore. You are called on to act in a real life situation, a real experience that has real life consequences.

Once you have had that experience, then you know something. If you have had the misfortune of being in a situation where you had to put your active shooter training to use, then you know in a much deeper way what that's about. You know what it's like. No one has to explain it to you or argue with you about what it's like. And you can't erase it from your memory. That experience is ingrained in your mind and soul. It won't ever leave you. No one will be able to take that experience away from you. That's the power of experience over just talking about things. Actually experiencing it impacts you deeply. You know the truth of what it's like because you have lived it.

Many decades ago, when the communist revolution swept Russia, this young communist went to a small village and called all the people to gather in the community meeting house. Once they all had gathered, the communist spent a few hours using his best, most reasoned arguments for why communism was the best way for society to be ordered and how Christianity was oppressive. He made some good arguments. Many people listened intently and a few of the younger people nodded their heads sometimes in agreement. When he finally was finished there was a hush in the room. Then, an old man stood up to face the community. He was the priest of the parish church, the one who had baptized everyone

gathered there, married many of them, and the one who had done funerals for their parents and some of their children. Looking at the faces of all those people who he knew and loved, demonstrated not just by his words but by the way he lived among them, he addressed them by saying only three words: Christ is risen! With one voice the community shouted back, "Truly, he is risen!" And with that, everyone filed out of the meeting house leaving the young communist speechless. The best arguments can rarely overcome lived experience.

When the early Christians discovered that the Spirit could work through Gentiles as well as Jews, this was activity that caused them to have to re-evaluate their theology, their understanding of how God works in the world. The Spirit of God is only supposed to fall on Jews. That's how it had always been. But now, the Spirit is working through Gentiles. Look what they are doing! They are working miracles too. They are also proclaiming the gospel. What does this mean? How to explain these works?

Well, arguments were made to explain what was being witnessed. Some argued whether or not what the Gentiles were doing was the work of the Spirit of God. But Paul made no such arguments. He simply recounted what he had seen. He witnessed to what he had experienced. For whatever reason, the Spirit of God was now working through Gentiles. Paul had seen it with his own eyes. Because of what Paul had seen, and the witness he gave to what he had seen, the church came around to affirming that the Spirit of God is not limited to empowering only Jews. Gentiles are included. The church became more open and inclusive because they realized what God was already doing.

The same dynamic has played out through the history of the church. It has become clear that the Spirit works through women, even calling women to preach and even become bishops. It has become clear that the Spirit works through non-white people who are not of European descent. There are other legitimate theologies and ways of being church that are not based on the experiences of European white men. It is becoming increasingly clear that the Spirit works through gay, lesbian and transgendered people. It appears that the Spirit of God is free to

manifest her presence in the lives of all kinds of people, even those the church has historically pushed to the margins.

Now people make all kinds of arguments to make the case that the Spirit of God can't work through certain people. For example, the argument is still made in some quarters that the Scripture and church tradition is clear that women cannot be allowed to preach or take on certain leadership roles in the church, say bishop. But there have been too many women who clearly demonstrate through their lives that they are indeed called to preach and called to be bishops. Their actions speak for themselves. No matter how reasoned the argument, the works can't be denied. The same is true for those who are gay, lesbian and transgendered. If the Spirit moves in anyone to be used of God and they demonstrate the work of the Spirit by what they do, then don't the arguments that deny their ministry crumble in the face of lived experience? I think they do. Actions speak louder than words.

Most of us learned the song, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." It's true. The Bible does tell us so. We read in the Bible how much God loves creation, how much God loves each one of us, how each of us were lovingly knit together by God in our mother's womb. We read of how God sent the Son, not to condemn the world but to save the world.

But is that all it takes for you to know in your heart that Jesus loves you? If we just read John 3:16, is that enough to know deep in your heart that you are loved by God no matter what?

It's one thing to read about how God loves you and be told that God loves you. It's a whole other thing to experience for yourself God's love, to feel it in your heart, in your gut, in your bones, that you are loved by God and always will be. When you have experienced this love, when you know it in your soul to be true, then there's nothing that can pry you away completely from God. Sure, we all have our doubts from time to time. We all go through periods where God seems very distant. Life throws things at us and we wonder if God really does have our backs. But I am convinced that if we have experienced God's love then that experience is never completely lost. God's love becomes imprinted on our hearts. We just know, no matter what happens in life, or what

people tell us, that God will not let go of us, that God is always holding us in God's powerful hand. When you have experienced God's love, you don't need to be told about it. You don't need a preacher to tell you. You don't need to try to argue with someone about it. You have experienced it. You know it to be true. And your life lived out of God's love for you is the most powerful witness you can give to others about the reality of God, Jesus and the Spirit. As the old phrase goes, let your life speak.