

MERE WORDS

In Hebrews, there is this comment. *“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do.”* (Hebrews 4:12-13)

Is that good news or bad news? For those of us who have reached perfection, or close enough that we do not need to make any more significant changes, that is not good news. In fact, for those near perfection, there can be no good news. The very best you can hope for if you are already perfect is the same old, same old; don't change a thing. Be that as it may, some do not take this passage to heart. They do not believe it. Just another weird comment from a far-off time.

For those who know that Jesus is Risen and that the Holy Spirit is still active and very much alive among us, this is very good news indeed. In the midst of all the confusion, subterfuge, fear, and falseness going on everywhere around us and sometimes within us, there is One who sees clearly: One who will guide us back onto the PATH when we stray; One who will help us to spend our time and our energies on things we truly care about, before we end up squandering our lives on things we do not really care about.

What others may pick up as threatening does not alarm us in the same way. We know about the “Living Word of God,” and every Christmas we are reminded that “this Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The Holy Spirit of Jesus is as full of forgiveness, grace, and mercy as Jesus Himself proved to be. The evidence for that has been mounting for over two thousand years now. There are things we still fear, but they are on the “dark” side – not on the side of LIGHT.

So how is *that* for jumping in at the deep end? Yes, well, most of you do not spend a lot of time playing at the shallow end of the pool; not from my perspective. Not unless you have lost a lot of sleep lately. Christianity is about conversion and transition and transformation. We are often called “pilgrims,” and most of the time we know we are on a journey of faith and exploration. However much Jesus may accept us where we are, Jesus never leaves us where He finds us. That would not be loving – that would be cruel. Even so, we do not always cooperate with the journey, at least not at first. And many

of us claim that we still struggle with trust issues whenever the Spirit comes to us with new assignments or new perspective that we are not yet comfortable with.

Our reading this morning comes from First Thessalonians. In all probability, this is the earliest letter we have from Paul (about A.D. 50). It is logical that Galatians would be the first letter, since that is the region of the first missionary journey, and Thessalonica is early in the second missionary journey. But logic without supporting evidence is never enough.

A quick review: In the second missionary journey, Paul and Silas walk clear across what we call Turkey, trying to figure out where the Spirit wants them to plant new churches. They run out of land at Troas, meet Luke, and end up going across the Aegean Sea into Macedonia – what we think of as Greece. Their first stop is Philippi, where they end up being beaten and imprisoned. Always nice to have a few successes at the beginning of a venture to reassure us that the Spirit is with us and that we are on the right track. Paul had healed a slave girl in Philippi and, in the process, she came into her right mind but also lost her gift of soothsaying. Her owners did not mind their slave girl being possessed, as long as it brought them profit. So they were furious and dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrates, who had them beaten and thrown into prison.

When Paul and Silas get out of prison (a fascinating story in itself) they go on to Thessalonica. We know very little about the church at Thessalonica because Paul's preaching aroused such controversy that in only a few weeks, his friends escort Paul and Silas south to Beroea after dark. Soon the leaders of the opposition track Paul to Beroea and, fearing serious violence, Paul's friends now ship him clear out of the territory, down to Athens. Paul finally settles in to his main purpose and ministry of the second missionary journey in Corinth, where he stays for two and a half years. But the point is – *my* point is – things had moved too fast. Paul did not have time to teach the new Christians at Thessalonica anywhere near as much as they wanted to know, and not nearly as much as Paul knew they needed to know. Can you imagine such a thing?

Here is a small community of new Christian converts in the midst of a setting where there is considerable and serious controversy. Paul knows they have only had time to absorb a small portion of the Gospel Message and a small portion of the principles necessary for their new WAY of Life. Paul worries that thus partially equipped, they

may not be able to survive. So once settled in Corinth, Paul writes back to them with more information. But sometimes emails do not make everything clear, so shortly afterward, Paul writes a second letter to the Thessalonians to try to straighten out some of the things that were being misunderstood from the first letter.

Real life gets messy, and when we no longer have to pretend that everything is perfect or all cleaned up, then the stories get rich and we can get back to learning things.

In any case, however short or long his time with them, Paul has great regard and real hope for the Thessalonian Christians. He knows that they belong to God the Father and to the Lord Jesus Christ. Most of the world of Paul's time does not know this. Not even a glimmer. There are great temples to Jupiter and Apollos and Diana and Venus. The state religion is Emperor Worship. The only temple to Yahweh is in Jerusalem, and most people have never heard of Jesus.

I am still amazed. The only card Paul has to play is his rabbinical training. At least that is the only thing we can see on the surface. It buys him a hearing or two at the local synagogue. But the Message that the Messiah has come – that He has been crucified and Resurrected – very quickly looks to most of the Jewish elders like a crazy fantasy. And when it starts to cause controversy and division in the congregation, the opposition to Paul gets serious really fast. So Paul is beaten, stoned, chased out – all over the known world, so to speak. But he goes on believing that Jesus is the true Messiah. He goes on believing that the Holy Spirit of the Risen Lord, whom he met on the Damascus Road, is guiding and will continue to guide more and more people into the true purpose and direction in which God is moving things. So Paul does not care much what things look like on the surface of life. He serves this Spirit and obeys this Spirit, and he goes on working toward what he thinks this Spirit wants of him. It looked crazy to lots of people at the time, and many said so. (Felix and Festus and Agrippa among them.) Now it looks crazy to quite a few people in our time as well. But not to me. Not to those of us who have also encountered the Holy Spirit in our own lives. I only wish I could be as faithful to Jesus as Paul was. And I am exceedingly grateful for others who try to be faithful too.

“My dear friends, beloved by God, we are certain that God has chosen you, because when we brought the gospel we did not bring it in mere words but in the power of the Holy Spirit and with strong conviction.”

I do think we should all continue to be cautious about things that come to us as “mere words.” We should be careful about using “mere words” ourselves, at least when it comes to anything we truly care about. It remains a favorite quotation of our time that “actions speak louder than words.” But that is a very thin quotation in the way it is usually used.

First of all, most actions do not tell us the full story. I often cannot tell by a person’s actions what their real motive is, how sincerely it is meant, how deep it goes, or how long it will last. If a person says “I love you,” I cannot always tell what they mean by that. And if a person gives me a hug, I often cannot tell what they mean by that either. A little longevity – a little “history” – is often necessary if we really want to know what a person means. Frequently it is not my responsibility to figure out what somebody else means; I need to be paying attention to what I mean. Nevertheless, if we are in community – especially a faith community – it becomes more and more important to know who we can trust and who we can count on to mean what they say.

Most of us have run into con artists from time to time. Most of us have run into some people who “talked a good game” but seldom or never backed it up with commitment or conviction. “All say-so and no do-so” is a phrase all of us have heard and sometimes used. But that is no reason to go shallow. Words *are* deeds. To speak is an action. And sometimes without the words, we have no idea where the deeds are coming from or what they mean. When God speaks, it comes to be. Maybe not instantly, but inevitably. The Word of God is not a meaningless affair. At times we long to know and hear the Word of God clear and fresh again.

Well, unless something is twisted or amiss, *your* word is not a meaningless affair either. We have other sayings, like “a man is only as good as his word.” Most of the time, when someone speaks to me, what they say matters. They do not always say exactly what they mean, because sometimes there are insufficient words. Or like me, they have trouble finding the *right* words. But I appreciate their words, and usually in time they convey enough meaning to at least get me on the right track.

After the Gettysburg Address or Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, do we get all huffy and say, “actions speak louder than words”? Would I tell Winston Churchill to shut up during the

Second World War because “actions speak louder than words”? All through history we know times when words have inspired actions; without them, it is hard to imagine that the actions would ever have taken place. Words often *are* an action, and often they inspire us to action. Frequently words remind us of our faith and of our hope. People around us often need our deeds, but they also need our words. Oh yes indeed, some of us talk too much. But some of us also talk too little. “Silence is not always golden – sometimes just yellow.”

Why am I mentioning such things? Because one of the “myths” of the modern church – one of the myths of a lot of the members of most modern churches – is that we do not have to say anything about our faith because “actions speak louder than words.” We will just live our faith and say nothing about it. I was just wondering if all of you have noticed that this is not working. One of the reasons the modern church is dying in our country is because its people are afraid to speak. They are afraid they will be mocked or laughed at or considered kooky if they speak of what they believe or trust or truly care about. Many modern Christians go weeks, even months at a time, and never say the name of Jesus – never say anything about what they believe in or care about.

It is important to pick the time and the “audience,” hopefully because we are listening for the Spirit to give us a hint – to give us the “go-ahead.” But the truth is, if we never tell anybody that we love Jesus or that we believe that His Church, however imperfect, is still truly important, then most people will never know what we believe or guess that we care about such things.

By the way, Paul did not say that he *never* carried the Gospel with words. Paul did not say, did not imply, did not imagine, and never considered that he would carry the Gospel Message without using words. He only said that they were not “mere words.” Because the Spirit called him and directed him to speak, the words carried power, often far beyond what Paul could control or predict. Just like with you.

Paul was preaching and teaching wherever he went. If you put him in prison, he was talking to the jailers. If he was busy with his trade, he was talking with the other tradesmen and the customers who came by. Some think Paul was always being officious and offensive. I doubt that very much. I doubt it because of the impact of his life and because of the long list of amazing friends that loved

and supported him. What Paul did write was that he did not carry the Message in “mere words.” The words carried with them the power of the Holy Spirit – and strong conviction.

When you read the New Testament, does it sound like “mere words” to you? I suspect there are some people who could say that this is true for them. They never read it seriously enough or often enough to get past mere words. But that is not the way it is for me. I truly hope that is not the way it is for you. For me the mere words all too often go way beyond the definitions and ideas that I am expecting from them. They change into callings and invitations and inspirations from a different realm. And I have to struggle to return them to more mundane levels, or else I end up going with them into dimensions I cannot control and do not fully understand.

Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.

In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And I heard a great voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with humankind. God will dwell with them, and they shall be God’s people, and God will be with them; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.”

And he who sat upon the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.”