

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time • Year B

January 14, 2024

Readings

1 Sm 3:3b-10, 19
Ps 40:2, 4, 7-8, 8-9, 10
1 Cor 6:13c-15a, 17-20
Jn 1:35-42

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Which are more important: words or actions? Common wisdom suggests that words are unimportant, that deeds are what really matter. We say, “Actions speak louder than words,” and “He’s all talk and no action.” As children, we learn the saying, “Stick and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.” In movies and on television, we hear people issue the challenges, “You talk the talk, but can you walk the walk?” and “Put your money where your mouth is.”

Actions are important, but our experience teaches us that words are, too. Every adult here today can think of words you would pay hard cash to buy back: Words hurled in anger, cruel gossip, a stupid joke, a schoolyard taunt that left a classmate in tears, a lie told to a trusting friend. And what of all those unspoken words you would bleed to have the chance to say? Words of apology to lost friends, words of gratitude to dead parents, words of forgiveness to a child, words of love to a spouse. Regret for what we failed to say often far outweighs grief over what we said.

Sometimes, of course, there is nothing to say, and so silence is best. What can you really say to parents who have lost a child, to a spouse who has been betrayed, to a friend who has been told there are no medical treatments left to try? At such times, we speak a few words, some straws of consolation, but we know that standing there by the side of our suffering friends is the best we can do.

But sometimes, something *must* be said, and then silence is wrong. If our family is attacked, our faith ridiculed, our friends slandered, shall we say nothing? When we see injustice, should we not cry out?

So it is with today's gospel. There is Jesus walking along. Who is he? Is he important? He doesn't appear special. But then John the Baptist cries out: "Look! There is the Lamb of God!" John's words are so powerful that his disciples leave him to follow after Christ.

Without those words, Jesus would have walked by and John's disciples would have done nothing.

One of those disciples was Andrew. After spending some time with Jesus, he goes and finds his brother, Peter, and tells him, "We have found the Messiah." And because of Andrew's words, Peter leaves everything behind and follows Christ. Because of Andrew's words, three years hence Peter will suffer and die for the sake of Jesus Christ. Nothing in Peter's life will be the same because of Andrew's words, "We have found the Messiah!"

We are called to do the same, to point Christ out as John the Baptist and Andrew did. We who already follow Christ must proclaim to others, "We have found the Messiah!"

There is a mighty challenge here for all of us. If we are honest, the only time many of us speak Christ's name outside of a church is when we stub a toe, get cut off in traffic, or watch our football team make a bad play. Parents will discuss drugs and sex with their children, but not Jesus Christ. Married couples will share the most intimate and treasured parts of their lives with one another, but say little about their faith. Friends will talk about almost anything – money, politics, sports – but never mention the Lord. Nobody wants to be one of those strange people who talk about religion *in public*.

In seventh grade, I had a paper route for the Philadelphia *Bulletin*. And just about every Tuesday, a young girl – I think she was a junior or senior in high school – came running out of her

house when she saw me coming, and walked with me for several blocks. We exchanged pleasant chit-chat, though I was puzzled by her interest. However, I eventually concluded that my sparkling wit and overpowering charm were responsible. Until the day came when she asked me if I had accepted Jesus into my heart, and was I ready to meet him. I froze. I didn't know how to respond. My first thought was, "I will gladly go to meet Jesus right now to get out of this conversation."

Although I can respect the dedication of people who serve Christ in that fashion, that's not me, and that's not what I am suggesting. We don't need to start conversations with our coworkers and neighbors with the question, "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?" We still have it within our power – like the prophets Samuel and John, like the apostles Peter and Andrew – to speak words that will change people's lives. The people who need to hear those words aren't strangers. Like John with his disciples, like the brothers Andrew and Peter, we know them already. A friend struggling with addiction needs to hear us say, "Turn your life over to Jesus Christ." A married couple caught up in anger and disappointment needs to hear their families say, "Turn your life over to Jesus Christ." The lonely teenager and the struggling parent both need to hear someone who loves them say, "Turn your life over to Jesus Christ."

That's the start. And when they ask you, "How?", make your words real by your actions. There is nothing mysterious about this, nothing that can be handled only by experts. Bring them to church, hand them a Bible, teach them to say the rosary. Invite them to dinner, introduce them to friends, give them the gift of your time and patience as they complain and argue and cry. Promise to pray for them, light a candle, give them a prayer card of their patron saint. Send them the schedule for confessions, drive them to a treatment center, encourage them to make a retreat, get them to a parish mission. Take a walk with them after dinner, or meet for coffee before work, or sit by their hospital beds. Make them laugh when you can, dry their tears when you must, and let the Holy Spirit work through you.

That is what the Lord wants: Disciples who say the right things and do the right things, who both proclaim his word and imitate his example, who offer a sacrifice of praise to God and a sacrifice of time to those in need. Christ doesn't want our actions to speak louder than our words. He wants them both to proclaim the same thing loudly: "We have found the Messiah!"