

Words, Words, Words

Matthew 21.23-32

FUPC
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Imagine you're eating breakfast with your two children before they leave for school. As usual, everyone's in a rush. As they gulp down their cereal, you check in with them about the day's schedule and what's on the agenda. Part of your agenda is the lawn that needs mowing and the garage that needs to be cleaned. And so you pass out the assignments: Son, when you come home this afternoon, please get after that lawn, it's way overdue and the neighbors are beginning to complain. He's nodding his head up and down, as if to say, "I hear you Dad. Yep, got it. Will do. Good as done."

You turn to your daughter. Her assignment is the garage. Getting kind of messy out there, can't even pull the car into the left stall any more. See if you can pick up some of the clutter and put it in a pile, maybe sweep a little. What good's a garage if you can't even pull your car in? She looks at you with a look that says, 'Dad, you gotta be kidding! Me clean the garage? Yeah, right.' Body language, eyes, attitude and finally words... "Sorry, Dad, I have plans after school. I'm not going to be able to do that. Ask my brother, half of its his junk anyway!"

And so, out the door you all go, headed for work and school. You know that when you get home that night, the lawn will be freshly mowed, and the garage will still be a cluttered mess. At least based on the words you heard at the breakfast table.

Fast forward to 5:00 p.m. You're pulling into your driveway and you look at your lawn. The grass is taller than it was when you left this morning and looking really bad. You can't believe it! He said he'd do it, at least he gave you that impression. Not one blade of grass cut anywhere in sight. Where is that kid?

By now you've pulled up to the garage and just automatically park in the driveway because you know nothing's been done to it and it'll still be as cluttered and messy as it was when you left this morning. But you can't believe your eyes! Because right there in front of you is an empty stall. Where once there was clutter and leaves and junk... now's there's actually space to park a car and its clean! Amazing! Who did this? Can't be my daughter.

The conversation around the dinner table reveals the truth. Your son, even though he seemed agreeable to mowing the lawn, took a nap instead. Your daughter, even though she declined to clean the garage, somewhere during the day had a change of heart and cleaned it, even though it meant getting sweaty and dirty and breaking two fingernails.

Now, which of these children receives your praise? Which one did what you asked them to do? The first, who said yes, but actually meant no? Or the second, who said no, but actually lived out a yes answer?

This is Jesus' story and he told it to a group of people, religious leaders and big shots, who were pretty good with fancy words about God, morality, do's and don't's, and who's in and who's out with God. They were quick to say "Yes, God" but usually ended up taking a moral and ethical nap.

It's the final week of Jesus' life before the crucifixion. He has just healed a lot of people, he has cleared the Temple area like a madman on a mission, and now he's surrounded by the religious establishment. They're questioning him about where he gets his authority to do such things. They don't like it one bit. They'd like to silence him, discredit him. So they ask him for his credentials. He replies with a question of his own... it's a trick question about John the Baptist. He asks, "Was

John's baptism really from God or was it merely from men?" If they answer that it was from God, then they have to accept that all of the marginal and immoral outcasts who repented of their sins and were baptized are now held in God's embrace. They can't do that. It's so repulsive for them to accept prostitutes and tax collectors as equals with them before God. Impossible for them to do.

If, on the other hand, they reply that John's baptism was merely his own doing and not from God, they will feel the heat from the crowd because John was a popular guy with the people and they can't afford to lose the good will of the people. So they plead ignorance and say, "We don't know." Well, they did know what they felt. They believed that John was a fake, but they just couldn't say it. Instead they chose what was politically expedient and remained silent. Then Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things" ending with a variation of the story I just told.

And he ended his story with this question, "Which of the children did the will of the father? The one who said 'Yes' but didn't follow through? Or the one who said 'No' but ended up doing what was asked anyway?" The answer was clear that the second child actually did the will of the Father.

Jesus' punch line is that the tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom before the respectable religious leaders. Why? Because God is more interested in our actions than our words. God is more tuned in to what we do than what we say we believe.

It's a simple story. But it touches all of us in a tender place. So much of our faith has been reduced to words. Saying the right words, repeating the right words, singing the right words, praying the right words. We are a wordy bunch when it comes to our faith. When we multiply words, it's a sure bet that we'll end up saying things that we think we believe, or want others to think we believe... but that actually, we're not willing to act on.

The late Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the most powerful prophets of our day. His words still sting. In his last sermon before his death, he made this statement, "It's alright to talk about long white robes over yonder, in all of it's symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's alright to talk about streets flowing with milk and honey, but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here. It's alright to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day God's preacher must talk about the New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles...." and I should add, 'the new Big Island and the new Hilo.' We have problems in our own back yard staring us in the face that will never be solved by mere words. Piety can be pretty and it can be comforting. But pious words never kept a wife from getting beaten up, or saved a child from being sexually molested. Say "yes, yes, yes" to God all you want when it comes to the statement of faith or singing comforting songs... but the real test comes when we leave the sanctuary. At the end of the day, the lawn is either mowed or not mowed, and the garage is either cleaned out or still cluttered.

Listen to these words from the book of James in the New Testament, *"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead."* (James 2.14-17)

The old saying is that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. In principle, it's easy to affirm a lot of noble, moral, spiritual and beautifully expressed sentiments. When it comes to getting our hands dirty and sweating some, it gets harder. The religious leaders were insulted. They had memorized Scripture endlessly, they knew the fine points of the Torah, they could debate and discuss theology for

days on end. And that was their problem. They were all words, which, without any action from the heart, amounted to just a whole lot of hot air. And Jesus told them so.

The tax collectors and prostitutes didn't know any Scripture. They didn't know theology. They didn't know a transgression from a transmission. They expressed themselves crudely but honestly. But one thing they did know. They knew that they weren't worthy of God's forgiveness but it was given anyway and they were willing to receive it. They cared for each other and had hearts tender to the hurting, the failures, the broken, and the bruised. They might have started the day by saying 'No' to God, but ended it knowing the rightness of their need for God.

The unasked question at the end of Jesus' story is: So which of these people are you? With which of these children do you identify? And maybe the lesson is that we are both. We do have good intentions, and we do affirm a lot of good things about our faith and our dreams and visions, and God's love and the possibilities for healing and wholeness. We are sincere in this. We're not trying to fool anyone, we're not into being hypocrites. It's just that words come so easily and actually doing something about our words is a lot harder.

May God fill our words with enough energy and courage that they become three-dimensional expressions of love and caring. Let our words be unafraid to sweat. Let our words be unashamed to take a risk. Let our words become flesh, just as the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Amen.