



## ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

June 11, 2017, Trinity Sunday

Matthew 28:16-20

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Theme: Integrity is the correspondence between what we say and what we do.

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*Come to us from our blind side, God of surprises. Startle us with deep truth, even if we don't want to hear it. May Your Holy Spirit bear the words of Scripture we just heard across the years and lay them across our path, to trip us up or show us the way – whichever we need more. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

Several weeks ago I got an email from a middle-schooler from one of our Brick families, Henry Ley. Henry is one of the three children of Peter and Janet. He asked if I would meet with him. He said he was a finalist in a speech contest at his school, St. Bernard's. He asked if he could come by to discuss the speech. The assigned theme, Henry said, was "actions speak louder than words." I was flattered to be asked. When we met I told him I thought the assigned topic was challenging because it's something everybody already agrees with. Nobody would say, "Words speak louder than actions." How do you argue a point everybody agrees with?

As we talked about his speech, it occurred to us that the sharpest issue before him was actually integrity between words and actions. That is to say, words really do matter, actions really matter – even more, but what perhaps matters most is the correspondence, the integrity, between what you say and what you do.

I was invited to attend the speech contest at St. Bernard's. Five boys gave five fine speeches. But Henry, the youngest in the line-up, won. He was the only one who talked about the integrity between words and actions.



The brief Scripture passage Liz read a moment ago is set shortly after Easter. Jesus' disciples have gone back to Galilee. There they experience the presence of their Risen Lord. They respond precisely as you might expect. Verse 17 reads: *"When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted."* Actually, the Greek word translated "doubted" means something like "wavered," and for some reason the English inserts the word "some" that's not in the Greek. So the verse really ought to read, "And when they saw him, they worshipped and wavered." A perfectly understandable response – "worshipping and wavering." In fact, "worshipping and wavering" is exactly how the church has been responding to Jesus Christ for the last 2,000 years.

As they "worship and waver," Jesus speaks. He instructs them to make disciples from all nations and to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, perhaps as clear an enunciation of the Trinity as anywhere in the New Testament, which is why we're served this passage on this Trinity Sunday. At the very end of His short discourse, Jesus promises that He will be with them, "even to the end of the age."

But in between the command to make the disciples and the promise of His presence, exactly what He tells his followers to teach the people they'd baptize is a bit startling. You would have thought (at least I would have thought) that Jesus would have told them to instruct people what to believe, teach them words to believe. You might have expected Him to tell His disciples to go out into the world and teach words – doctrines about God.

But that's not what He does. Rather, Jesus tells His disciples to teach people "to obey everything I have commanded you" – actions, not words. And what had He commanded them over the last few years? According to Matthew, what Jesus has commanded is contained in several discourses, especially the Sermon on the Mount, His parables, and of course, the Great Commandment. And the sum of what He has commanded is to love God and neighbor, to show compassion, to practice humility, to welcome the stranger, and to live honestly. Jesus' last instruction is not so much about what to believe – words; it's more about what to do – actions.



There is not a scintilla of doubt in my mind that Jesus did care about what people believed. Theology and doctrine mattered then and they matter now. Words do matter. My guess is that Jesus assumed that the words you believe underlie the actions you do. This is certainly true in my experience. What people do in life, their actions, how they love, how they live, the mercy and grace they show or don't show, all of these actions or inactions are intrinsically connected the words they believe or don't believe.

There's usually an intimate connection between what you believe – your words – and what you do – your actions. On Sunday, we use a lot of belief language in church. We recite confessions of our faith in a loving God who commands us to love one another. We hear Bible stories about welcoming strangers and protecting the vulnerable. You listen to sermons, all the words Lindvall piles on week after week. Words, words, words, lots of words in church.

There's no doubt in my mind that these words about belief shape what church-goers actually do the rest of the week. This continuity between what we say we believe in church on the one hand, and what we do out of church on the other, is called integrity. Henry Ley got it just right in his speech at St. Bernard's School. And God help us, God help the church, if the integrity between what we "say" and what we "do" be severed.

Let me end with a little non-Biblical parable I like to rehearse every once and again. It's about just this subject – the integrity between what we believe as a church and how we live as a church in the world. The parable goes like this:

“Along a windswept and rocky coastline there were a great many shipwrecks. The survivors of these shipwrecks were forever in need of rescue from the icy waters. They needed food, warm shelter, and some loving reassurance after their ordeal. To accomplish this service, numerous life-saving stations grew up along the coast. Volunteers gave their time and resources, often risking their lives for others. They braved the surf in their lifeboats to rescue the drowning. They fed, housed and comforted countless



storm-tossed survivors.

As the centuries passed, many of these life-saving stations grew in reputation as bright and safe havens from the storms of life. The members of the life-saving stations enjoyed each other's company, enjoyed their meetings and club ceremonies. Some members found great satisfaction in keeping the stations neat and their lifeboats ship-shape.

As the ages rolled by, some life-saving station members suggested that risking your neck in small boats for the sake of strangers was well, foolish. 'People who put out to sea ought to know the risks they're taking and accept responsibility for themselves. After all,' they asked, 'is their safety really our problem?' Other members noted that the survivors who washed up on the beach made a real mess in the life-saving stations, wet and sick as they were, and that all the food and blankets and lifeboats were a strain on the budget.

Some of the stations stopped sending out boats at all, and no longer offered care for the survivors of storms. They kept their lifeboats, however. In fact, they painted them beautifully and moved them inside as objects of veneration and remembrance. And they kept up the buildings. They had meetings, continued to enjoy each other's company, and held their traditional ceremonies. But outside their doors, the storms still blew and ships still foundered."

The mortal danger that every church forever faces is that it become a pleasant fellowship of the like-minded, a vaguely spiritual club for people who are culturally comfortable with each other.

The mortal danger that every church forever faces is that it become a weekly liturgical performance, fine music, a little oration, some marching about in uniform.



The mortal danger that every church forever faces is that it become no more than a business that never quite manages a profit, but keeps the building up, pays the gas bill, employs some nice people, and worries on little more than all that.

The continuity between what we say we believe in church, and what we do out of church is called, quite simply, integrity. Henry Ley got the point just right in his speech.

*In the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*