



## ACTIONS MATTER

August 27, 2017, Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 16:13-20

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*O Lord, you bind us together in love, to learn, to be healed, to grow and to serve. We thank you that we are not alone. You watch over us, guide us and lead us in your righteous ways. When we stumble and fall, you lift us up and place us on the path again. Guide us with your wisdom this day, especially as we draw close to you in your Scriptures. Keep our hearts and minds open and ready to serve you, for we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.*

There was a formula that was hammered into my head in seminary from my Ethics professor: “You can only act in a world you can see, and you can only see a world you can speak.” “You can only *act* in a world you can *see*, and you can only *see* a world you can *speak*.” In other words: in order to know how to act in a situation, you have to know how to truthfully describe what’s going on in front of you. In order to act, you have to correctly name what you see.

Last week I preached about our God-given gift of speech and the blessing that it is to both communicate with each other, and reflect the image of our God through our words. God created us through holy speech and God gifts us with voices to proclaim the Gospel. Jesus’ ministry was dominated by speech, and God continues to speak to us through the Holy Spirit. So as people of faith, I argued, we cannot claim that “actions speak louder than words.” Words matter: they mattered in the beginning in Genesis, they mattered in Jesus’ ministry, and they matter here and now.

But building upon the point I made last week, the second half of my argument is that our actions matter just as much as our words. Our actions, as people of faith, come from the words that we speak. We use our words to describe the world



around us and then we act accordingly. And as people of faith, we have a particular theological language for the world around us. I quoted the letter of James last week because James reminds us of how dangerous our speech can become when it does not reflect God's love. Well, James had a bit to say about our actions as well:

*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 yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."<sup>1</sup>*

When our words and actions are not in agreement with one another, James says, our Christian faith has no life. If our actions do not reflect the words we proclaim, there is a disconnect. Consequently, we project that disconnect to others and our Christian witness is damaged. As people of faith, the words we proclaim and the actions that follow matter.

The passage that Don read for us today records a story in Jesus' ministry that all four Gospels tell. As word begins to circulate about Jesus and his miraculous deeds, Jesus asks his disciples who people are saying he is. He's performed healings, spent the majority of his time teaching and collected many followers. Some people think he's another of God's prophets like Jeremiah, some say he's Elijah returned and many others are comparing him to his cousin John the Baptist. But Jesus wants to know who his disciples think he is—they've been with him the longest, heard his teachings and seen his miracles—who do they say he is?

The geographical location of this question from Jesus is a historical site. Caesarea Philippi, about 20 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, was an area known for cultic worship that Rome tried to reclaim during Jesus' time. It had a history of pagan worship, later Roman rule, and after Jesus' ministry became a site where Jews were persecuted.<sup>2</sup> In other words, it was an area in conflict with Jesus' ministry. So, for Jesus to ask his disciples this very important question, "Who do you say

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<sup>1</sup> James 2:14-17.

<sup>2</sup> *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, page 343.



that I am?” in Caesarea Philippi is significant. Faith is not a private matter. Jesus wants a public profession from his followers in the midst of pagan territory, in the shadow of one of Caesar’s temples. Jesus wants to know whom his disciples will follow. Are they loyal to other gods or Roman rule? Are they willing to follow Jesus when his ministry conflicts with worldly powers?

And as usually happens, Peter stands and proclaims his faith, louder than all the others. Peter, easily Jesus’ most vocal follower says, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!” Peter makes a public declaration of faith, and because of his faith, Jesus calls him the “rock” on which God will build the Church.

At first glance it might appear that this text is all about Peter and his faith. After all, he’s the first one to call Jesus “Messiah” and the one who responds to this incredibly important question in Caesarea Philippi. But, at a closer look, Jesus isn’t talking only to Peter when he asks for public loyalty from his followers. In the Greek, Jesus is speaking in 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural when he asks his disciples whom they follow. So, as it says in The New Revised *Southern* Version of the Bible, Jesus is actually asking, “Who do y’all say that I am?” And although Peter speaks first, Jesus responds to Peter by prophesying the creation of the church—a community of followers who will be called to proclaim faithfulness to Jesus. This word “church” is only used in Matthew and points to the reality that leadership is not given just to Peter, but to all who proclaim faith in Jesus. Peter’s confession represents our confession. Peter’s leadership is a rock on which the worldwide Church stands.

Often, in the Gospels, Peter is emblematic for the faith and failures of us all. Although he proclaims great faith in this passage, only seven verses later he will doubt Jesus’ words, prompting a harsh rebuke. Peter has wonderful moments of faithfulness in the Gospels but also makes many mistakes, doubting Jesus’ ministry and rejecting his leadership. Because of this, Peter is often emblematic for all of us in the Church—we all have moments of great faith coupled with times of great failure.

In Capernaum, historically a small fishing village on the Sea of Galilee, there is a modern church over ancient ruins that many think might have been Peter’s house. Because of records from the fourth century and the ruins of a Medieval Church and



a first century synagogue nearby, Christian pilgrims have been coming to this site to remember Jesus' teachings and the ministry of his disciples, most especially Peter. At Capernaum, there is an enormous bronze statue of Peter with the Sea of Galilee in the background. As you explore the site, there are plenty of spaces for quiet reflection along the shore, but there is also a short rocky drop into the water. Next to the rocks is a huge metal sign, written in English, Italian, Arabic and Hebrew, warning tourists of their danger. The English says, "Attention! Unstable rocks!" But if you know your Italian, you might also see a connection to the disciple Peter. The Italian reads "Attenzione! Pietre instabili!" Which sounds very much like: Attention, Peter, the rock, is unstable. Right behind the enormous bronze statue of Peter, the rock of the church, stands an ironic reminder that the rock is often unstable.

Friends, Peter is unstable because Peter is emblematic of the Church. The history of the Church is filled with stories of faithfulness and failure alike. Yet still our Lord—patiently, persistently—calls us to follow him. As people of faith, we have to acknowledge that we haven't always gotten it right, neither our words nor our actions have consistently reflected our Messiah. We too are unstable. Especially for the privileged among us, we must confess the times in which our actions haven't aligned with our words, and we've failed to listen to the cries of those most in need. The racial tension in our country that has risen to the surface—if we're honest, that has actually always been there—has reminded us that the Church has sometimes been faithful but at other times has failed. This text today reminds us of the opportunity we all have to match our words and actions as people of faith. Jesus calls us, in the midst of the world's brokenness, to publicly proclaim faith in him and act accordingly. Faith is no private matter; we are called to proclaim through word and action what we believe.

On the Mount of Remembrance in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem sits as the World Holocaust Remembrance Center. It is more than a museum because it seeks to "document accurately one of the darkest chapters in the history of humanity; and to grapple effectively with the ongoing challenges of keeping the memory of the Holocaust relevant today."<sup>3</sup> When I visited this museum this past May, it was

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.yadvashem.org/about/yad-vashem>



not the first time I walked through Holocaust stories of painful remembrance. But it was the first time I traveled to such a place with individuals of color.

Our pilgrimage group was made up of African-American men, white men and women, and one Native American man. We spent several hours walking through the museum, reading the stories and listening to the first-hand accounts, and later that day our leaders gave us the chance to process the journey with each other. One African-American man in our group, a part-time pastor in rural North Carolina, was quiet during a lot of our reflection, until finally sharing a personal story. He grew up in the small town of North Carolina in which he currently serves, in the midst of racial segregation. Throughout his childhood, though, despite segregation laws, there was one general store that served him and his fellow African-Americans. They were able to shop there whenever they wanted and were never treated differently based on the color of their skin. They were even allowed to carry lines of credit by the storeowner. As a child, my friend didn't think much about it, until walking through Yad Vashem that day.

It was walking through the museum, and coming across the name of that store owner in the names listed in remembrance, that my friend realized the kind owners of that general store were Jewish. In that small southern town in North Carolina, one Jewish family refused to abide by the laws of segregation. As my friend journeyed through Yad Vashem that day, he began to understand why. The story of his childhood and the stories of those families in the Holocaust were connected. The moment he saw their name, tears ran down his face. He remembered that racially divided small town, but he also remembered that family and their store, and gave thanks for their witness. The actions of that one family, their rejection of the law of the land, shaped his understanding of what it means to be a faithful witness in the midst of an often unfaithful world.

My friends, in both words and actions, we are called to proclaim our faith in Jesus. Jesus' words in our passage for today foreshadow the Church—a congregation of Jesus' followers who are called to show a different reality than the one the world offers us. Our ministry together, our worship and fellowship, are meant to proclaim an alternate reality to the broken world in which we live. Our actions matter as people of faith, because our actions show others another way to be. It matters that



we serve meals at Jan Hus on Tuesday evenings, that we build homes for neighbors through Habitat, that we use our hands and able bodies to serve those who are most in need. It matters that we sit down at the table with neighbors from Neighborhood Coalition for Shelter and share a meal. It matters that we walk to Church of the Living Hope and get to know the stories of our neighbors in East Harlem. It matters that we travel to West Virginia to help those ensnared in rural poverty rebuild their homes. It matters that we get to know the stories of those recently incarcerated and help them readjust to life outside of a prison cell. My friends, our actions matter. We are called to be servants, to be faithful and to stand up for those most in need. It matters that we see, we listen, we show up and we serve.

“You can only *act* in a world you can *see*, and you can only *see* a world you can *speak*.” Words matter. Actions matter. As I said last week, in this fractured culture, as followers of Jesus, our speech must be clear. Moreover, the actions that follow our speech must be clear as well. When those two things don’t line up, our Christian witness is compromised. But when they do line up, we tell our neighbors a different story—a truer story—and we project a different reality: our Lord’s. Our faith is lived through both words and actions. And the story we tell has the ability to teach the world another way to be, a truer way to live.

*In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.*