



WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

October 1, 2017, The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 21:23-32

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Theme: Authority is rooted in the integrity between what we say and what we do.

You come to us as one without power as we understand it, O Christ, yet You somehow have the power to draw us to this place and toward You once again. May the word we just heard in Scripture overpower us and speak to each of us the truth we need to hear, not merely what we want to hear. 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.

I went to high school in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. My high school was not large, but it was big enough to have a forensics team. I don't know whether schools even have forensics teams any more. Forensics was a fancy old name for formal debating. High schools had varsity and junior varsity forensics teams. There were structured competitions between schools. It was like tennis, but instead of balls you used words. You scored points in verbal volleys back and forth over the net of some assigned topic. I was not on my school forensics team, but I liked a girl named Sue Orhanen who was. In fact, Sue was an Upper Peninsula forensics legend. My crush never went anywhere, which is just as well. You might want to think twice about marrying a forensics champion.

Jesus did some "debating" in the course of his ministry. In the passage Garrett just read, Jesus holds his own against a crack Jerusalem forensics team of chief priests and elders. The story unfolds in front of the temple a day or two after Palm Sunday. Jesus had entered the city to the roar of the crowds, and His popularity has the local authorities nervous. Earlier in the week, He'd made them even more anxious by tipping over the tables of those moneychangers in the temple. Now He's back at the temple and the air is electric. These religious authorities approach



Jesus and ask him, “By what authority are you doing these things?” That is to say, “Who says you can tip over tables in church and say the things you’re saying?”

Jesus answers by asking them a question. This may seem evasive to us, but it was a respectable forensics tactic back then. He asks them where they think John the Baptist’s authority came from. Remember, John the Baptist has been dead a couple years, beheaded by King Herod. The chief priests and the elders go into a team huddle. They have a problem and they know it. If they say John’s authority came from heaven, Jesus will say, “Then why didn’t you pay any attention to him?” But if they say John’s authority was only human, the street is going to erupt because John was still wildly popular. So the religious authorities, who are nobody’s fools, come out of their huddle, shrug their shoulders and say, “We don’t know.” And Jesus says, “If you’re not going to answer authority questions, you’ve no right to expect me to.”

Then He tells a story. And in an indirect way, this story actually *does* answer the question. Simple story: a father had two sons, one who says “yes” but does “no”, and another who says “no”, but then does “yes.” Jesus asks, “Which one of the two did the will of his father?” The chief priests and the elders answer, “Well, the **first** one, of course, the one who said no but changed his mind and did what his dad asked.” What else could they say?

Then Jesus drives the point home. Tax collectors and harlots, he says, the kind of folks who appear to have said “no” to God, are the ones who did pay attention to John. This rabble, these outcasts you despise, actually said “yes” in the end. John’s hard-edged preaching seems to have turned around some wayward lives. But you guys, He says, you religious authorities, you’ve putatively said “yes” to God, but you lead narrow, picky, judgmental, exclusive lives, lives that say “no” in action. This, of course, was the kind of answer that could get you crucified.

Both this edgy debate and the pointed parable are about integrity – or lack of integrity – between words and actions.

A decade ago, Stephen Carter, who’s a professor of American Law at Yale, published a book entitled *Integrity*. One of the most memorable illustrations he offered about that subject is from the world of college football. I hardly ever lay



football illustrations on you, but it *is* October and this one haunts me a decade after I first read it.

Carter tells the story of the University of Colorado's 1990 win that would push them toward a national college football championship. Here's the tale in Stephen Carter's words:

"In October of that year, trailing the University of Missouri by four points with time running out, Colorado had a first down near the Missouri goal line. Four times Colorado tried to score a winning touchdown, and four times the team failed. Because all four downs had now been used up, possession of the ball should have switched to Missouri, which could then run out the clock... only two seconds were left in the game. However, the referees inexplicably lost track of the number of plays that had been run and gave Colorado an illegal fifth down, which it used to score the winning touchdown. Asked about the error, Colorado coach Bill McCartney shrugged and said it wasn't his responsibility: 'I felt strongly about the fact that Colorado earned the victory....' he said." Stephen Carter concludes, and I agree with him, *"McCartney, a devout Christian who preaches the importance of solid values in everyday life, got this one exactly wrong... His team did not earn the victory."*

He may have won the game, but McCartney's words – especially his words about Christian faith – took a beating that day.

Let me get personal with this question of authority and integrity, I mean personal about me, the preacher. Week after week I stand in this pulpit and spew out 1,600 words, more or less. What authority do I have to do this? Why should you listen? The authority of a preacher has just a little to do with a seminary degree. It has only a little to do with being ordained. It has absolutely nothing to do with the rather supercilious title, "Reverend," in front of my name. I have the gall to stand up here and talk only if I do two things.

First, what I say must begin and end in Scripture. A sermon must be rooted in Scripture; it must be rooted in a word deeper and older than my human words. A sermon cannot just be the preacher's idea *du jour*.



And secondly – and here’s the rub – anything I say only has any authority if it has some measure of integrity with the way I actually live my life. Point is, this isn’t just true for preachers. If you stand for anything, if you claim the word “Christian,” the same is true for you. It’s true for the church as whole. All the fine churchy words about love and mercy and compassion are empty unless the church really *does* love, mercy, and compassion. It’s true for you who are parents. I always say that children are equipped with “hypocrisy radar.” They home in on any and every inconsistency between what mom and dad say and what they do. And it’s true for you who are lawyers and teachers and CEOs and office supervisors and executives and bankers. Integrity simply means what you *say* and what you *do* are, well, “integrated.”

I was asked to review a book this last week, a collection of essays on mentoring. One of the essays included a powerful story about words and integrity that I offer as period to this sermon. Walter Wangerin was a young, white, out-of-his-depth pastor to a little urban blue-collar congregation in Evansville, Indiana, a church of working-class whites and blacks. The church organist was a wonderful black woman named Joselyn. In Wangerin’s second year at the church, Joselyn was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He was determined to be a faithful pastor to this woman he’d come to adore. He visited her almost daily, and during his visits he would be a fountain of words – prayers and Bible passages and chatter about what was going on at church, anything to dodge dealing with the specter of her dying. Finally, one day after a lot of minister words, Joselyn looked at her pastor, raised a bony finger to his face, and said, “Shut up.”

Wangerin did just that... mostly. He visited faithfully, often just sitting with her in silence. But one day, near the end, he turned to Joselyn and spoke words, just three words, three words he later attributed to the Holy Spirit. He said, “*I love you.*” And Joselyn widened her ebony eyes... and put out her arms and hugged Wangerin and whispered, “*I love you too.*”

Just a few, brave and perfectly true words, that’s all you need sometimes. But in order for those words to have any authority, any power at all, they have to fit what you actually do.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

