

“Big Words, Little Deeds”

Reading: *Jeremiah 28:1-9; Matthew 10:40-42*

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“Talk is cheap,” as the saying goes, though I realize that I say this as a preacher who gets paid, in part, to preach. And, come to think of it, there are business consultants who charge hundreds if not thousands of dollars an hour for their talk, and there are many politicians whose talk has cost a lot of people a lot of money. But the point is that words come easily, and anyone can say just about anything, but what really matters is being able to back up your words with action. It’s something we see in movies and TV shows all the time, when one character says to another something like, “You talk big, but let’s see if you’ve got what it takes,” followed by a fight scene or a race or some other competition. Is your talk cheap? Are your words just words, or do you have what it takes to back them up? It’s ultimately a matter of integrity, because nobody likes a braggart.

Boasting and not being able to back it up was seen as a grievous social sin in Jesus’ time, as well as many other cultures throughout history. Even today, when anyone can claim pretty much anything and have someone believe it, and when fake news stories can spread around the world on the internet before anyone can call it out, we still have a special contempt for empty words. Politicians’ campaign promises are recognized as such, and overstated advertising claims are laughed at. Talk is cheap. What matters is action; we’re a nation of doers. And yet in God’s kingdom, while actions certainly matter, what matters more is the word of God and our response to it. For many in our world, the mentality is, “talk less, do more,” while in God’s world, what matters is “do less, *listen* more,” because what God does far outweighs anything we can do.

Words matter in God’s kingdom. There’s a familiar line from the prophet Isaiah that says, “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news!” And that’s certainly true. Who doesn’t love getting good news? And if we’re hoping for good news, we’re listening for the footsteps of the messenger. But there’s a second part of that verse that didn’t make it into your Bibles but should have, and it goes like this: “And how smelly on the mountains are the feet of those who bring bad news.” You can smell bad news coming sometimes, and you want it to go stink up someone else’s mountain.

The prophet Jeremiah knew this all too well, because he had the unfortunate task of bringing an awful lot of bad news to an awful lot of people. He lived in the period of time when God was bringing to pass all of the consequences of the accumulated generations of rebellion from God’s people, and Jeremiah had the mission of telling people to make their peace with God. Their nation was about to be destroyed, and unlike other times in their history, God was not going to save them at the last minute. The nation was doomed, but their only hope for survival as individuals was to surrender to their enemies. That’s hardly the sort of message that the king wants his people to be listening to, though, and so there were all kinds of other prophets telling the people more palatable prophecies. And, one could argue, their messages were more trusting in God’s power, though they were less faithful to what God had actually said: people like this prophet Hananiah were preaching that God would do what He had done in the past, and save them miraculously. There would be peace, he said. And Jeremiah’s response was to say that he hoped Hananiah was right; who wouldn’t rather have peace than a destroyed homeland and a future of miserable exile? “But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the LORD only if his prediction comes true,”

Jeremiah said. The proof is in the pudding; what really counts is what God actually does. Is this word actually coming from God's mouth? Has this prophet really listened to God?

The words of Jesus in our Gospel reading for today follow right after our reading from last Sunday, which is set in the context of this time in Jesus' ministry when He sends out His disciples on a mission to preach the announcement of the arrival of the kingdom of God. He sends them out "like sheep among wolves," because even though they are preaching good news and doing good deeds like healing the sick and cleansing the lepers, the arrival of God's kingdom is bound to displace the kingdoms of the world and will demand the overthrow of the little kingdoms we each make in our own lives. So He warns them that they will not always be well received, though they should trust God and recognize those who do receive them well. And that brings us to our passage for today: "Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward."

Jesus' message to them is, of course, that they are acting as ambassadors of His kingdom, and so those people who are hospitable to them are in fact being hospitable to the kingdom and the king they represent. But more than that, to receive the messenger is to receive their message about that king, which in this case is the message that God's kingdom has arrived with the arrival of Jesus. To welcome such a prophet is to place yourself in a position of humility and receptivity to that prophet's message. You're not just inviting the prophet in, you're inviting the prophet's word as well. This is the critical thing: welcoming the word of God, inviting it in, giving it a place in your life. Again, many if not most people are not willing to do this, and they'll chase the prophet out of town. Reject the prophet, reject the word. Welcome the prophet, welcome the word.

You see, sometimes this word of God is just too expensive for me, so I'd rather listen to a cheaper word from somewhere else. I like the prophet Hananiah's word better than Jeremiah's; I'd rather have miraculous salvation in the last moment than the hard message of repentance and consequences. But we don't get to choose between God's easy word and God's hard word; there is only God's word and not God's word. And so what we sometimes do is try to make up the difference with some deeds instead. I don't like what I'm hearing from God, so I'll listen to an easier message and then try really hard to be a good person or a generous person or a nice person and hope that makes up for throwing that prophet out of town. God's word on repentance is too big and I don't like it, or God's word on what faithfulness in human sexuality looks like is too big, or God's word on justice for the poor is too big, or God's word on trusting Him with my possessions is too big, or God's word on loving my enemies is too big, and I can't welcome that kind of word. It's too challenging. So I'll give some money to a charity or a church instead, or volunteer somewhere, or do something nice for someone.

I'd much rather receive a little word from God and do some big deeds instead, because I can't control the word of God and I can control my actions, so let's keep this God thing somewhere I can manage it. But the problem is this: in God's kingdom, the bar is set pretty high when it comes to receiving His word, and it's set pretty low when it comes to our deeds. That's good news for some of us, because it levels the playing field in a way. Some people can do more than others, but that's not what really counts in God's eyes. What counts is whether you accept His word, and that's the same standard for everyone.

“If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward,” Jesus says to His disciples. “Little ones” in this verse doesn’t necessarily mean children; the sense is “humble ones” or “those of lesser significance.” His kingdom is made up of “little ones” like these; He says in the next chapter that the “least” in His kingdom is greater than John the Baptist, and elsewhere that it’s like a mustard seed, the “littlest” of seeds. He’s referring here to a small act of kindness given to one of His less important followers. You could offer the famous rabbi Jesus something to drink out of a desire for recognition, but offering something to drink to one of His followers probably isn’t going to gain you much favor in the eyes of anyone who really matters. A cup of cold water is a simple, small act of hospitality, but it’s the hospitality that matters more than the act. It’s the welcome of the word of God that matters more than the water.

In other words, you can give millions of dollars to charity, but you won’t impress God if you haven’t first received His word. And, at the same time, one small cup of cold water truly given in the name of God’s kingdom, given out of a heart that desires God’s word, even such a small deed is worthy of reward in God’s eyes. Not many can give millions, but everyone can give a cup of water. What Jesus is calling us to is the humble reception of the genuine, challenging, hard word of God, and a humble act of response. He’s calling us to humble ourselves before God and truly receive God’s word, with all of its demands that we set aside our own way of doing things and acceptance of God’s way of doing things, and then whatever God leads us to do as a result, no matter how small the deed is, if it’s truly in response to God’s word and done in love, is worthy of reward. He expects little of our deeds, but He expects us to accept the magnitude of His word. We would usually rather have it the other way around.

What we see in God’s kingdom is that if you are truly receiving God’s word and listening to what He says, then your little deeds can become infinitely magnified by God’s faithfulness, and thus there is room for everyone, small or great, to participate in the work of God. He does not call you to do everything, He calls you to give one cup of cold water and watch as He uses it for great things. He may not call all of us to sacrifice everything, but He calls each of us to fearlessly give what few resources we have for His service, and He will multiply them to meet the needs. We’re seeing that in action at Five Loaf House, which none of us could have done on our own, and none of us could have done it in this way without God’s empowerment and multiplying our actions. The wisdom of our world insists that this is not how it is, that talk is cheap, especially God’s talk, and that what matters is what we do. God has a different wisdom that confounds the world’s wisdom, and what matters most is that we bend the knee before God’s wisdom first.

In God’s kingdom, your little deeds are far outweighed by your hearing of God’s big words. Your contributions to the kingdom, as important as they are, are multiplied in the end by God’s action, not by your own greatness. What matters first is that you hear and respond to God’s word, and response means trusting that what God says is true. That requires that we prostrate our souls and our wills before God and convert our thinking to His thinking, confessing that my own wisdom is not nearly wise enough. What wisdom is God calling you to convert to His wisdom today? What word is He calling you to heed? What great action is He calling you to humble before Him, to set aside your own meager power and allow to be filled with His great power? Listen to God’s word today.



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