

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
305 EAST MAIN STREET  
DURHAM, NC 27701  
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



**“Saying Yes to Jesus: When Actions Speak Louder Than Words”  
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**26<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)  
October 1, 2017  
Matthew 21: 23-32**

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My mama warned me the first time I got invited to a revival. “They’ll try to save you,” she said. “They will want you to come down front and accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Just remember that you were saved when Jesus died on the cross for you.”

She didn’t really want me to go, but I insisted. After all, the pastor was the father of one of my best friends and two other close friends were active in their youth group. They really wanted me to go and I thought it would be okay. So when the night of the revival rolled around, I met my friends and the four of us sat way up front in the center aisle.

The service went on much as I expected until after the sermon when the “altar call,” as it is referred to in the Bible Belt, took place. The revival preacher, a guest from out-of-town, came down front and began to talk about Jesus and how important it was to welcome Jesus into our hearts in a public way and to claim Jesus as our Lord and Savior. He also invited people forward even if they had already been saved to renew

their commitment to Jesus. He was very eloquent and very persuasive. It didn't take long before people were coming forward. He would pray with them and then some of them would leave out the side door with a deacon, while others returned to their seats. Pretty soon, my friends started going up to renew their commitment to Jesus. The pastor had done a great job of stirring up our emotions, so lots of folks were crying. I sat there like a stone. Terrified. As people around me got up and went forward, I felt like there was a giant arrow pointing down from the sky right at me with the word "SINNER" written on it in bold letters. I wished I were invisible. I wanted to get up and join the others just so I wouldn't stand out like a sore thumb. It was just renewing my commitment to Jesus, right? What harm could there be in that? But what did it mean really? My faith in Jesus was already very much a part of me. I already sought to respond to God's grace by living a life of love for God and my neighbors. Why did I have to prove my faith by going forward? I knew deep down that I did not and my mom's words echoed silently in my head. I sat tight and prayed for God to guide me in a faith that would be more than words on one night at a revival, but a lived faith in the world, an active faith that worked for peace and justice for all God's people.

In today's passage from Matthew's gospel, we find Jesus in the temple teaching. This is only his second day in Jerusalem and already he has stolen a donkey and ridden into the city amidst shouting and loud Hosannas. Heading straight to the temple after his triumphant entry, he continued to draw attention as he overturned the tables of the

money changers and cured the blind and the lame. No doubt, his actions disturbed the powers that be.

On his second day in Jerusalem, Jesus notices a fig tree that is not producing fruit. He curses it and it withers. As he teaches at the temple, the chief priests and elders of the people approach him, none too happy with his antics, and question his authority. In his usual style, he questions them right back and leaves them stumped and without an answer. And then he tells a story.

You've heard the story already. It is a story of two brothers. The father, a vineyard owner, asks each of his sons for help. The first son does not agree to his father's request, but then ends up doing what his dad asked after all. The second son immediately agrees to do his dad's bidding, but then gets distracted and doesn't follow through. Jesus asks, "Who did what the father asked?" The answer is obvious: The one who acted.

The moral of this story is clearer than an Aesop fable: Actions speak louder than words. And in case the chief priests and elders didn't get it, Jesus spells it out: John the Baptist had come to them with a plea for them to repent and bear good fruit. They continued to talk a good game, but their actions did not reflect their faith in God, as they rejected John as a prophet and refused to believe that Jesus was from God.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

[The chief priests and elders] thought they were doing the right things, mind you, but they had gotten so attached to their own ideas about what those things were that it was hard for them to accept much correction. First John the Baptist and then Jesus suggested that they trade in their beliefs for a fresh experience of God, but they could not bring themselves to do that. They said yes to God while they acted out a great big NO to Jesus, who suggested they might be in for a very big surprise.

People they despised were going into the kingdom ahead of them, he told them – not instead of them, but ahead of them – people who may have said no at the beginning and changed their minds and went, while those who refused to go continued to mistake their own convictions for obedience to God.<sup>1</sup>

Before we go pointing fingers at the chief priests and elders, however, we should recognize ourselves in this story. We should recognize that this story is one that the church needs to pay attention to, lest we get caught up in the belief that what we say is more important than what we do.

In our history, the church (be it local or institutional) has too often gotten caught up in our language and our statements of faith and what people must say in order to prove that they are holy and worthy. We have spent endless time and energy over

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, “The Yes and No Brothers,” (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 188-9.

debates about language and meaning and interpretation. Not that language isn't important! I am a lover of words and know how important words can be. But we can't stop there, and too often we have. We must take our words into the world as actions of love, peace, kindness, and compassion. We must bring our words into our hearts so that every breath we take and every move we make are breaths and movements that enact God's grace in the world to those who are in need of justice, welcome, healing, and acts of love. We must also recognize the many people in the world who may say no with their words, but whose actions live out Jesus' gospel message of caring for the marginalized and working for peace and justice in the world. Which ones do what God asks them? Jesus' story begs the question.

It is easy to get our beliefs mixed up with our actions. It is easy to believe that if we say it, then it is as good as done, right? It is easy to come to church each Sunday and say the words and sing the songs, but not live out during the week the meaning of what we have said and sung.

In the book *Out of Africa*, Karen Blixen (a.k.a. Isak Dinesen) tells the story of a young boy named Kitau who came to her door and asked for a job. She gave him one and he worked faithfully for three months. After three months, though, he came and asked for a reference so that he could work for a Muslim in Mombasa. She didn't understand why he might want to leave and offered to increase his pay so that he would stay. He didn't want to stay though, and he explained why. He was deciding between

becoming Christian or Muslim and wanted to see for himself how each religion lived out their faith in their daily lives. He had lived three months with her as a Christian and now would live with the Muslim Skeik Ali bin Salim for three months before he made his decision.

Blixen had a hard time absorbing this information. She wrote, "I believe that even an Archbishop, when he had had these facts laid before him, would have said, or at least thought, as I said, 'Good God, Kitau, you might have told me that when you came here!'"

Maybe Kitau didn't tell her, but Jesus certainly never hid it from her. A life lived as a disciple of Jesus is a life of action, caring for the poor, the marginalized, the neglected, the rejected, the sick, the needy, the hungry, the thirsty, and any who are in need. A life lived as a disciple is more than a life of words, more than a profession of faith. It is a life of action. It is a life of love.

Before I close, I want to go back to that South Carolina revival for just a moment. Though there was an emphasis on spoken words of faith in that service that made me uncomfortable, that does not mean that there was no corresponding action of faith. In fact, this church was one that reached out and cared for the community in many ways and many of their members lived their faith actively each day. Please do not hear me judging them. I am not. I told that story to lead into a conversation on the difference

between words and actions. In this passage, Jesus invites us all to test our words against our actions and to recognize that, in the end, our actions speak louder than our words.

May our words and deeds on this World Communion Sunday and every day reflect our deep faith in our good and gracious God.

In the name of our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer God. Amen.

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*Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.*

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