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Philippians 2:1-13, Matthew 21:28-32  
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Decades ago, a great Christian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, looked at the state of the church in his country and even around the world and said this: “The time of words is over. Our being Christian today will be limited to two things: prayer and action.” The time of words, he said, is over.

I have thought a great deal about words this week; and what I kept coming back to is how there is in all of us, especially nowadays, a curious aversion to words. We distrust them, scoff at them, always suspecting there is an ulterior motive behind the spate of words we hear on a day-to-day basis. Or else we have given up on words altogether, mired as we are in this swampland of false advertisements and stump speeches and talking points and fine print.

I had a conversation with a great friend of mine several months ago, and we talked about a book both of us admire, the autobiography of one of the greatest saints in the church, Saint Theresa of Lisieux, and we gushed on and on about how she said this and that and this and that, marveling at her devotion, and I said something along the lines of, “Man, if only I could get a copy of this book into the hands of the folks at my church...” and my friend cut me off, saying, “Yeah, well, that’s all and good, but it’s just talk. Just words. We read this stuff and you know what happens? Nothing. We just go on our merry way, doing the same old thing.” I was in a foul mood the rest of the day.

We are right in the middle of a political hurricane at the moment, with speech after speech and promise after promise flying right past all of us, and yet what are you and I saying to each other in the meantime (and with good reason) ? *We’ve heard it all before! Oh, it’s just words; they’ll say anything to get elected. Talk is cheap. At the end of the day it’s what they do that counts.*

Maybe Bonhoeffer is right. Maybe the time of words is over.

Jesus, embroiled yet again in another war of words in the Temple at Jerusalem, hashing it out with the chief priests and the elders, the very fine, noble, upstanding, religious men of his day, people you and I – let’s be honest now – would have held in great esteem had we lived in those days, says to them, “A man had two sons, and this father went to one of his sons and said, ‘Son, I need you to take up your plow and work in the vineyard,’” and the son, listening to his Ipod, sucked into his Playstation, answered, “Uh, nope. Sorry,” but then changed his mind, got off the couch, and went.

The father then approached his other son, asking him the same question, and his son said, “Yes, sir! Right sir! You can count on me, sir!” but did nothing at all. Then Jesus asked those holy men of the Temple, “Now which of the two did the will of his father?” And they answered, “Well, the one who got up, stretched, and got busy doing.” Then Jesus exclaims, “Tax collectors and prostitutes are getting into the kingdom of God before you,” which was another (scathing) way of telling these fine men of the church that the time of words is over. There comes a time in the kingdom of God when the only things that matter are prayer and action. Talk is cheap.

Last week, James mentioned how his sermon for last Sunday came from my favorite story in the Bible, the story of the master of the vineyard who paid those who worked all day and those who worked for just a few minutes the same wage. I wish I could have preached that text. A member of the staff asked me a couple of days ago what I planned to preach about this week, and I said, “Well, the

other parable of the vineyard, the one about the two sons,” and the person said, “Well now. Good luck with that one.”

This parable is a toughie for us preachers. Think about it: Here I am preaching about a parable whose moral is more or less ‘talk is cheap’ and yet what am I doing right now? I’m talking. It’s what we expect when we come to church; it’s what we care about, hope for, or in some cases even long for. We want to hear good words on Sunday morning, and none of you should apologize for that.

Before I started serving my last appointment, which was my first appointment, I remember a few of the church leaders invited me over to dinner so we all could get acquainted with each other, when one of the first questions they asked me was, “So tell us about your preaching.” Then another one asked, “Are you longwinded in your sermons?” And my wife, who accompanied me that evening, starts nodding her head in the affirmative before I had a chance to say anything.

We care about preaching; we expect to hear good preaching; and none of you should ever apologize for it. Yet for Jesus, the important question is seldom if ever, “How well does he or she talk?” The main question for Jesus is, “How well does the person doing the talking put his or her words into action? How well do people listening make the words they hear come alive?”

Jesus ends his great Sermon on the Mount, the sermon in which he says such things as ‘blessed are the poor’ and ‘do not be anxious’ and ‘turn the other cheek,’ saying not, “Whoever hears these words of mine and thinks they are *really interesting* will be like someone who built his or her house on rock....,” but rather “Whoever hears these words of mine and *does* them I will liken that person as a very wise builder” and so on and so forth. For Jesus, it’s about doing, movement, action, and he drives this point home time and time again.

Saint Luke says that one day a great crowd of people surrounded Jesus and someone in the crowd told him his mother and brothers demanded to see him, and Jesus says, “Who are my mother and brothers? My mother and brother are those who hear the word of God and – what? – do it.” Jesus tells a lawyer, a man who wanted to know who was his neighbor, about a traveler who saw a man beaten within an inch of his life on the side of the road, and this traveler lavished that man until he found himself nursed back to health. Jesus then looks at the lawyer and says, “Go and do likewise.” And today Jesus asks, “Now which of the two sons *did* the will of his father?” Thy kingdom come, thy will be *done*, accomplished, put into action.

Years ago, after my first year of seminary, my mentor, who pastored a congregation in Belmont, called me into his office and told me about a Bible study he and a few parishioners of his had conducted on the 10th chapter of Matthew, the chapter in which Jesus tells his disciples to preach the gospel but to take nothing with them, no money, no extra clothes, nor extra food, nothing. After a few days of talking about the interesting facts about this passage, he said, someone in the class finally raised his hand and said, “Um, I think we should do this.” Someone said, “Do what?” “*This*. We should go out with nothing and just tell folks the good news.”

The class then decided it was what they were going to do – to go out with nothing and to share Jesus with whomever would hear them. My mentor asked me if I wanted to tag along and I remember thinking, “This is the dumbest idea I’ve ever heard!” I went, though, and it changed my life. Yet what struck me during the trip was hardly that a small group of boneheads dared to go out with nothing; it was that a few, brave Christians read the Bible and said, “We should really do this.” Most of us have been in enough Bible studies to know the drill: We sit around, we chit-chat for a while, and then we

look over a passage of Scripture and say, “Wow, this is so interesting! I wonder what that would’ve been like? Just think about it,” and the study ends in prayer and we’re off.

What, though, would it mean if instead of talking about facts – I heard a British journalist this week talk about how we Americans just love trivia in our country – we said, “You know, we should do this. Jesus said, ‘Forgive and you will be forgiven.’ We should do this. Jesus said, ‘Give to all who ask of you.’ We should do this. Jesus said, ‘Welcome the poor, the stranger, the lost, the sinner.’ We should do this.”

A man had two sons, Jesus said. One of them said, “Oh yes! I’m there! You can depend on me!” and rested on his laurels; the other said, “Look, I’m busy; my calendar is full; how about next month?” but ended up changing his mind and did the will of his father.

The time of words is over.

And that’s the thing about this God of ours. God did more than just bark a long litany of commandments from heaven and leave it up to us to obey them. This God did more than simply say, “Love your neighbor as yourself!” and “Serve the poor among you!” and then leave it up to us to fulfill these words on our own.

No, this God came down and served the poor among us. Jesus did more than just tell us to bless those who curse us, and to pray for those who spitefully use us. No, Jesus really blessed those who cursed him, praying forgiveness over those who used him, even his own executioners. Jesus did more than just talk about his commandment to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses and to follow him. No, Jesus really did it; Jesus really denied himself and took up his cross in obedience to the God who consumed his very being. There is nothing Jesus calls us to do that he has failed to do himself. When our God speaks, his words become real, active, alive...*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*, and did the will of his father with us.

And that’s good news, because if Jesus did the will of his father for us and with us then it means none of us has to worry about how we’re supposed to get it done ourselves. Saint Paul, in our other lesson this morning, writes, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” and the sweat begins beading on our foreheads and our stress level begins to spike.

“Work out your salvation,” yes, Paul really said that. Yet, Paul goes on to say, “For it is God who is at work in you,” well, to work out your own salvation; which is, I suppose, Paul’s way of saying that whatever it is God wants us to do, whatever the work God has in store for you and me, it is none of it our responsibility to complete. It’s hardly about us, Paul would keep reminding us; it’s about what God wants to do through us.

Abilities? We love a good resume, skills worth showcasing, talent. Yet for Jesus, our abilities mean nothing in the long run. The father can use anyone. He just needs one thing: Our readiness simply to show up. How the work gets done is up to God.

A man had two sons, Jesus said. One son said no but did it anyway; the other one said he would but did nothing at all. Now which one do you think did the will of his father?

Well, I’ve talked long enough. I’ll see you in the vineyard.