

Sermon: Just the Words the Actions Have to Match

Year B, Proper 19

[Proverbs 1:20-33](#); [Psalm 19](#); [Job 38:1-11](#); [Wisdom of Solomon 7:26-8:1](#); [Isaiah 50:4-9a](#);
[Psalm 116:1-9](#); [James 3:1-12](#); [Mark 8:27-38](#)

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I know James warns us to be careful if we are teachers, since *we who teach will be judged with greater strictness* (James 3:1). Now clearly that is me, right. Technically my title is *pastor and teacher of the Brookline Community Church*. But it is all of you as well. You have taught me so many things. The word “cannellini bean” takes on new meaning after washing out the 17th 20 oz. can. The word “arrangement” means something different when three voices and a piano can take a song from 1847 and make me realize that God abides with me as the Twin Towers fall once more in my memory. Jocelyn says “heaven” in the Lord’s Prayer and I hope heaven is as delightful as she describes when I get there.

They are just words, just sounds that fall off the tongue. But they mean something more, something different, because I have learned them here. I’ve learned what words like “abuse” and “addiction” and “grief” mean, in ways that are not meaningful until you are sitting side by side with someone. I have sat with people whose lives are a mess, just a pure mess, and I have prayed with them. And the word “Amen” means something different.

These are all just words.

In my corporate life, I spoke to some colleagues about being worried about going to a meeting, because I was afraid I’d get so angry that I’d say something I couldn’t take back. Trying to reassure me, someone said, “Don’t worry about that, Cath. You’re not mean. You’re funny.” I couldn’t figure out how to say to them, “The thing that makes the funny, makes the mean.” I have to be so careful. Because that line between funny and mean, it can be so, so easy to cross.

We’ve all done it. We’ve all said something we didn’t intend to say out loud or we didn’t intend for the person we were talking about to hear it. But they did. And now we can’t take it back. Not only because we didn’t intend to say whatever it was. But because whatever we said was true. Maybe it reflected poorly on us. Maybe nice people, maybe Christian people, don’t say things like that. But the truth of it was clear in whatever we said. So there was no taking it back.

I can remember times when I was the one who said the awful thing. I can remember times when I had the awful thing said to me. Oh yeah, James has got it right, *And the tongue is a fire... it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.* (James 3:6) It burns and keeps burning. I can remember things from years ago and they still burn.

Being a Christian doesn’t mean that you never make a mistake, never say the burning word. It doesn’t mean that you stay silent and never say anything. Or worse yet, only say uncontroversial things that deny the reality of abuse, addiction, grief by pretending they don’t exist. Being a Christian means that you know you have to say “cannellini” and “arrangement” and “heaven” as well. You have to say them because you live them.

Jesus said *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.* (Mark 8:34) Not “if any want to become my fans, and bail when the record gets to 0-16.” Jesus asked for followers. And just in case you were hoping that a follower was someone with a guaranteed seat for the Super Bowl, he clarified, *For those who want to save*

their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. (Mark 8:35).

There are plenty of hard things we do as Christians. Plenty of hard choices we make. We turn the other cheek. We forgive. We make new wooden signs for a minister who's been dead for over 200 years. We lug donated sofas into the side halls of churches and then lug them off to Good Will when no one at the Yard Sale will take them home. We rehearse and practice and argue about whether the pause goes here or there. We figure out how to help while respecting someone's dignity and we figure out if the best way to respect someone's dignity is not to help. We listen to folks overwhelmed by financial need and we offer them prayer which seems like worse than nothing.

But some of the hardest choices we make are when we make our actions match our words. In your bulletins are forms that have the word "pledge" in them. We're asking every family to fill one out, with as much generosity as you can. You are pledging financial support for the church. It means that you will do your best to provide however much money you thought you could next year. Maybe things change next year and the amount of money changes too. Of course, that's all a pledge means. That you'll do your best so the church can count on so much support from you.

But here's the other thing a pledge means. It means that you understand that we're all working together as teachers and students. "Faith", "fellowship", "welcome", "service" are words and then we live into them and discover there is more there we need to do in order to mean them. "Community", "children", "service", "hearing and being heard" are all just words until we weave them into our lives and find new meaning in them too. Together we find out that those words don't mean the same thing to all of us. We have to take risks to live into these words. We pledge to use all our talents to figure out how make the risks we take most likely to pay off. We pledge to use all our talents to figure out why some of the risks we took didn't work out like we expected.

Our closing hymn today will be "Here I am Lord", a song inspired by Isaiah's reply to God's call, as well as little Samuel's reply to God, a story we started the summer with. We won't all sing it the same way. Some of us will wander far, far away from the notes the rest of us are singing. But we will sing it together. And from tongues which have sometimes let slip some awful, fiery, painful things that we wish to this day we could take back, will come a blessing. Because singing together is always a reminder of what we have pledged to do together. We pledge to take risks, and take up our crosses and follow Jesus. Together we pledge, I will go Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.