

Sermon for August 17, 2008

“Saying What You Mean, and Meaning What You Say”

Matthew 15: 10-20

I'm certain you have had the sad experience of saying something and then immediately regretting it—one of those open mouth, insert foot kind of things, you know. While that is often true, it is also true that sometimes when we say, “I really didn't mean to say that,” -- we actually did mean it, even if only for a moment.

Far too often we declare that we are not really responsible for our words because they were spoken in anger or frustration. We declare that others make us angry when in reality all they can do is present circumstances that we respond to. If we recognize that we are responsible for our attitudes, then it seems we must be responsible for our words as well.

In our scripture passage today, Jesus publicly castigates the Pharisees, then turns to the people around him and says in essence, “What you put into your mouth isn't what matters. What comes out of your mouth does, because it comes from the heart.”

This is a clear and direct contradiction of a great deal of the lifestyle and teaching of the Pharisees. This saying of Jesus cancels all the food laws of the Old Testament. Once and for all Jesus lays down that what matters is not the state of a man's ritual observance, but the state of a man's heart. No wonder the Pharisees were livid. William Barclay writes, “This statement was not simply alarming, it was revolutionary. If Jesus was right, their whole theory of religion was wrong. They identified religion and pleasing God with the observing of rules and regulations which had to do with clean and unclean, with what a man ate and with how he washed his hands before he ate; but Jesus identified religion with the state of a man's heart.”

Jesus always said what he meant; and meant what he said. In fact, he tells us exactly what defiles ones heart: evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, and slander. We say “actions speak louder than words;” Jesus says, “our words help define our actions.”

Here is some useless trivia: According to statisticians, the average person spends at least 13 years of his or her life talking. Ordinarily, in a single day enough words are used to fill a 50 page book. But the larger question is what are you saying with all of those words—and for the most part, are you saying what you mean—and meaning what you say?

Sometimes it may even boil down to HOW we say things and how the words we say are interpreted:

Once a king dreamed that all his teeth had fallen out. Immediately, he sent for one of his soothsayers to interpret the meaning of his vision. With a sad and mournful voice, the soothsayer told the monarch that the dream meant that all his relatives would die and that he would be left alone. Angered by this interpretation, the king drove the servant from his presence.

Another was called and the king told him of his dream. At this, the servant smiled, and replied, “Rejoice, O King; the dream means that you will live yet many years. In fact, you will outlive all your relatives.” This pleased the king a great deal, and in his joy he gave the interpreter a rich reward.

The two men had said, in fact, in different ways, the same thing. It wasn't so much what they had said; it was HOW they had said it that brought either wrath or joy.

Sometimes it's not only what you say, but how you say it:

A careless word may kindle strife. A cruel word may wreck a life,
A bitter word may hate instill; A brutal word may smite and kill.
A gracious word may smooth the way; A joyous word may light the day
A timely word may lessen stress; A loving word may heal and bless.
(Author Unknown)

We are use to hearing that actions speak louder than words. I would argue that both actions and words define who we really are. What we say, good or bad will have an influence on how we respond to all the issues of life.

Many a person may have had a faultless life on the outside, but carried the most evil of thoughts within his heart. What matters to God is not what we eat or how we eat it; not even the rules and regulations we create that so often govern how we act—or do not act; not how important we think we may be or what we have accomplished. What matters to God is why we act the way we do; why we say the things we say—what's in our HEART more so than what is in our head. “Man,” as Aquinas had it, “sees the deed, but God sees the intention.”

Three weeks ago I officially qualified for Medicare. I know...it just doesn't seem possible to me either. Bemoaning that fact the other day, I received this advice: “Go out and buy a new car, you probably won't have to make all the payments anyway!” Humm...not making payments is good—not having enough time to make the payments—not so good!

Sometimes it's not only what you say, but how you say it, indeed!

Perhaps this anonymous prayer REALLY IS about saying what you mean and meaning what you say:

**“Lord, Thou knowest better than I know myself that I am growing old and someday will be old.
Keep me from getting talkative, and particularly from the fatal habit of thinking I must say something on every subject and on every occasion.
Release me from craving to try to straighten out everyone’s affairs. Keep my mind free from the recital of endless details—give me wings to get to the point.
I ask for grace enough to listen to the tales of others’ pains. Help me to endure them with patience. But seal my lips to my own aches and pains—they are increasing and my love of rehearsing them is becoming sweeter as the years go by.
Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally it is possible that I may be mistaken.
Keep me reasonably sweet; I do not want to be a saint—some of them are hard to live with—but a sour old woman is one of the crowning works of the devil.
Make me thoughtful but not moody; helpful but not bossy.
With my vast store of wisdom, it seems a pity not to use it all—but Thou knowest, Lord, that I want a few friends at the end.
Amen**

Remember, (Matthew 5:8), “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

Amen

**Rev. Dr. Joe M. Wilson
Ladue Chapel PC
08-17-08**