

Fifteenth Sunday in the Time of Pentecost (Lec. 26)

September 25, 2011

Bethesda Lutheran Church

celebrating God's love in Christ

and the 25th Anniversary of Tim's Ordination to Ministry of Word and Sacrament

If it is true that actions speak louder than words,
is there something that speaks even louder than actions?
How about... "attitudes"? How loudly do they speak?

People often ask what it's like to be a pastor married to a pastor.
In some ways, it's great to have a spouse with a similar vocation,
and in other ways, it's required a lot of attitude adjustment along the way
to get by.

A story...

One Saturday night, in the early days of our marriage,
when Tim was preparing to preach for his congregation,
and I had a Sunday off from my field work parish,
(which meant I would be able to hear him preach the next day),
Tim plunked his manuscript down in front of me and said,
"Done. Want to read it?"

So I read it. It was not one of Tim's typical intricately-woven sermons.

"What do you think?" Tim asked.

I probably said some words of affirmation, maybe a suggestion or two
– I don't remember the specifics –
but what I do remember is ending with these words,
"I'm just not quite sure what you're trying to say."

I expected more discussion. I was willing to help.

Tim's response was, "Hmmm." And that was it.
We soon went to bed without another word about it.

The next morning, as I sat in a pew waiting to hear Tim's sermon,
I wondered if and how he might have tweaked it,
or if I'd just be hearing the same thing I'd read the night before.

I knew he'd woken up early (4:30, was it?) but we hadn't said much to each other, since my brilliant comment of the evening before.

Tim proceeded to preach an entirely... different... sermon.

My first reaction was to be horrified,
horrified at the power of my words,
horrified that my *I'm just not quite sure what you're trying to say*
had brought him to scrap what he had slaved over and start again.
My face was flushed. I felt awful.

But... it was a beautiful sermon.

Not only did I clearly understand *what he was trying to say*,
but I also had been taken on a moving journey to get there.
I don't remember the texts of the day or the theme of the sermon.
I do remember that I felt the power of the Word, in my person, bone-deep.

Both "preaching" and "nurturing relationships" are two vocations
that can be gut-wrenching, heart-breaking,
asking us to take on the attitude of openness to risk,
the attitude of vulnerability.

It is dangerous, but vital work
It is God's creative specialty.

In marking this 25th anniversary today, we are celebrating that creative energy of God,
that energy that has been flowing through Tim's words, spoken and sung,
through his grace-bestowing gestures and beautifully-crafted liturgies.

We give thanks for the peace of God which has held him and held others through him.

We give thanks for the *audacity* of God which has pushed Tim out into the world
to speak and act prophetically,
and we ask that God would continue to empower him in his serving
and empower us all in our partnership in the Gospel.

Now, not all of us are *preachers* of the Gospel, at least not in an official capacity,
but all of us have the chance each day to be *enactors* of the Gospel,
to be God's emissaries in a world that is hungry for meaning and truth.

The things we do and the choices we make do indeed speak louder
than any carefully-chosen words possibly could.

Actions speak louder than words, and attitudes can speak louder still
... at least to those who are paying attention,
which, of course, includes God.

The God we have come to know in Jesus values words, actions, and attitudes of the heart;
especially those attitudes that lead to making *God's* priorities *our* priorities.

Jesus' parable for today is laced with talk of attitudes and priorities.

I've often asked myself, when confronted with this parable,
which of the vineyard owner's children I am
the one who says, "No way!" but later has a change of heart and
spends the day in the vineyard, or
the one who says, "Of course!" but then let's other priorities
get in the way.

And I know that both of those children live in me,
and clearly, they both need to be redeemed... daily, if not hourly.

God longs to have our whole selves, all our trust, nothing held back,
so we can wake up saying, "Yes, of course, I'll work in your world today!"
and then we proceed to *do it* with vigor and focus and joy,
not assuming that life will be easy, but that it will flow with grace,
that we need not be afraid to take risks,
or to worry about what others think of us,
that our lives will be gifts to the world God loves.

But we are afraid. We forget to trust.

It seems the best we can do is waffle back and forth,
living in trust one moment, in fear the next,
centered in God's loving intentions, then falling apart.

The words of today's reading from Ezekiel that jump out at me
speak of our desperate need for *attitude adjustment* with strong verb phrases:

"Cast away your rebellious attitudes!"

"Get yourselves a new heart (and a new spirit)!"

"Turn, then, and **live!**"

First comes the attitude adjustment; then comes the living!

First comes the heart transplant; then comes the delightful walking with God!

But where shall we get this new heart and this new spirit?

We can't get it from grit, self-sufficiency, or from trying extra hard.
Only God makes hearts which are vulnerable, plants them in us,
and then breathes into us a spirit courageous enough
to give those hearts away in love and compassion,
to risk them in all that we do.

Then God gathers us into communities, where risking becomes possible,
and breathing freely and joyfully is nurtured,
where we encounter others who regularly turn to God for attitude adjustments,
that our actions might speak loudly of God's love for all.

So much of what we do in worshipful community is practicing vulnerability,
opening ourselves to one another, to exercise our openness to God...
which leads to our openness to the world.

Just to open our mouths to sing is an act of risk, when you think about it.
We make ourselves vulnerable when we add our voices to the voices of others,
when we allow the words and melodies of faithful composers
to carry us to new insight and beauty.

To walk forward with open hands to be fed by God
can be for us a weekly heart transplant,
where God gives us the heart of Jesus, the vulnerability of the cross,
the absolute joy of giving, and living in trusted community.

So we will make our way, one way or another, to the vineyard today, and tomorrow,
and each day thereafter, with these new hearts.
We find those things we love to do, and do them with all our hearts.
Whatever is your vocation, whether it's to learn and grow, to work for justice,
to run your business, to care for others, to play with your children,
and even to preach sermons...
all are ways of giving to one another our hearts,
and also ways of being God's hand for reaching out to the lost and lonely
hearts of our world,
not for some reward, but for the sheer joy of being human together
with the attitudes of God.