

Speaking Louder Than Words
James 1:22-25, 2:14-17
September 3, 2006

A construction worker met the owner of the home he had just finished building. The worker said, “If I had known this was your home, we would have done a better job.” That’s a loaded statement, not only about the quality of workmanship on the house, but also the quality of character possessed by the construction crew. It says a great deal about integrity, values, and how values translate into the quality of our work.

One morning as the men were cleaning up after their weekly prayer breakfast, one of the church’s neighborhood rovers came in. He smelled the pancakes. One of the men assumed that I, as pastor, had set up this test in order to see whether the men would live their faith as they had just read from the book of James. Would they not only be hearers of the Word, but also doers of the Word? They indeed reheated the griddle and offered the unexpected guest a warm breakfast of pancakes and ham. There was integrity between the Word they heard and the behavior that followed. They passed the test; their faith was shown to be real, for it was translated into action. They practiced their faith.

Gustav Nelson is a leader in the Presbyterian Church. In his book, *Service is the Point*, Nelson notes that Christians in congregations like ours—mainline congregations—are extremely poor at translating our faith into our daily lives. For example, he says that less than 10 percent of those who gather each week for worship typically take part in any specific Christian service, such as feeding the homeless or working to help the poor or visiting the shut-in. Even in so-called “high commitment” churches where tithing, participation in Bible study, and service to the community are supposedly required, less than 50 percent of the people actually move beyond worship to ministry.

Many Christians are able to speak about what their faith means to them as a source of comfort in times of difficulty or as hope in times of despair, but very few are able to articulate how their belief shapes their actions. Most of us would have a hard time explaining how our faith influences how we shop, relate to co-workers, or vote in elections. In short, we have disconnected what we believe from what we practice.

Parker Palmer is a Quaker writer and educator. In his more recent book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, he describes the divided lives we live. Our words and actions are divorced from the truth we hold within. Here are a few examples of the ways this divided life is manifest. “We refuse to invest

ourselves in our work, diminishing its quality and distancing ourselves from those it is meant to serve. We make our living at jobs that violate our basic values, even when survival does not absolutely demand it. We remain in settings or relationships that steadily kill off our spirits. We harbor secrets to achieve personal gain at the expense of other people. We hide our beliefs from those who disagree with us to avoid conflict, challenge, and change. We conceal our true identities for fear of being criticized, shunned, or attacked.”¹

Palmer suggests that the divided life is not a failure of ethics, but a failure of human wholeness. “Doctors who are dismissive of patients, politicians who lie to the voters, executives who cheat retirees out of their savings, clerics who rob children of their well-being—these people, for the most part, do not lack ethical knowledge or convictions...But they had a well-rehearsed habit of holding their own knowledge and beliefs at great remove from the living of their lives.”² In other words, the soul and the role have become disconnected. Integrity is lacking.

This is the concern of James when he writes, “Be doers of the Word, not merely hearers,” and “Faith without works is dead.” Hear Eugene Peterson’s translation of these words. “Don’t fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other....You can no more show me your works apart from your faith than I can show you my faith apart from my works. Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove.”

Our souls often become hidden by the temptations, deceit, and standards of our culture. We are willing to compromise our inner values in order to conform, to fit in with the crowd, to be popular. We succumb to what is convenient rather than do what is honorable. It is easier to be self-serving than it is to be other-serving. We lead false lives, incongruent with the inner being deep within.

The call is to integrate our faith into our actions, to rejoin soul and role. Listen to the inner voice deep within and follow its lead, not the lure of society. Our Christian faith and our daily living should be amalgamated so that our inner core is never separated from our outward conduct. Faith is the source of our actions, which, in turn, are the proof of our faith. It is like a continuous cycle in which there is no division. True religion is as much about doing the Gospel as it is believing the Gospel. Deeds do not replace our faith, they complete it.

One day Saint Francis of Assisi goes to a village with one of his monks for the purpose of preaching the gospel. Along the way they encounter people from the community and engage in conversation, sharing

their lives and helping them with their work. The day grows to a close, and Francis suggests that it is time to go back to the monastery. His companion queries, “Didn’t we come here to preach the gospel? When are we going to do that?” St. Francis replies, “If these people have not heard the Gospel today, then reading from the Bible will not make any difference to them!”

When soul and role are joined, when faith and works are integrated in our lives, there will be no difference. Our actions will speak as loud as or louder than our words.

Think of ourselves as actors on stage with a script to follow. Our script is the Scripture, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It provides us our lines, our stage cues, our prompts. It describes the character we are to embody. The stage is the world, specifically the place we are at in any given moment. We are always “on stage.” We are performing the relevant pages of “the script” wherever we are. We apply the script to make it germane depending upon the current context. Sometimes actors “lose the plot” and act outside the drama, becoming unfaithful to the playwright’s intent. When there is a breach between the script and stage, between the words and action, the performance suffers and the entire drama is diminished. Our role as Christian actors in the drama of life is to move our faith from the page to the stage, from our hearts to the art of living. “When the divine Script takes shape and is embodied in our ‘live performance,’ there is a graceful ‘rehearsal’ of the Incarnation as we know it from John 1: ‘In the beginning was the Word *and the Word became flesh* and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.; For us—in us—the living Word leaps out of the page and onto the world stage!”³

Sam was wise beyond his 42 years. He supervised an incredibly gifted and dedicated group of professionals. The mission of their unique agency was “To provide the best treatment possible to assist our clients in taking back their lives.” Although the staff met every Monday at 7 a.m., one week Sam called a second staff meeting. Changing client schedules at the last minute was not easy, so the staff was a bit miffed at Sam. They spent a lot of precious energy muttering, “This had better be important.”

The staff all arrived on time, 7 a.m. Thursday – all that is, except Sam. The professional, efficient, organized supervisor, who expected similar behavior from his staff, walked nonchalantly into the room 15 minutes late. He offered no explanation or excuse for his tardiness. He took time to fix himself a cup of coffee, sat down, slowly opened his folder and said, “This morning I would like to propose that we all resign our positions, effective immediately, and close the doors of this agency.”

The staff waited. They were shocked and confused, wondering if this was one of Sam's well-known jokes. They waited for the punch line. But there was no punch line. Sam simply repeated his proposal while the staff sat fidgeting and filling the room with unspoken tension and hostility. Finally, one brave soul spoke what all were thinking, "What the bleep are you talking about Sam? Why would we do something as idiotic as you suggest? We have the largest clientele base, the highest success rate and the lowest recidivism rate in the county. We received more grant money this year than ever. We have a solid financial base. Just look at the numerous awards for our excellent work! So, I don't get it. Just what are you proposing?"

"I propose closing down the agency while we still have some integrity...because, good people," Sam said, deeply charged with emotion, "I see us beginning to exhibit signs of the dreaded disease of success. We have witnessed our professional friends and colleagues becoming infected with the disease of 'slip-sliding' down the rat hole of compromised integrity. I don't want us to follow them."

Sam's words were prophetic. The staff realized that they had slid toward compromise as the awards, accolades, statistics and grants mounted up. They had allowed their egos and sense of self-importance to usurp the reins of their professional lives. They were no longer genuinely striving to live up to the honesty, integrity and high spiritual values they had claimed were more important than anything else. Sam challenged them to close the gap between their stated intentions and their actions.

No one, including Sam, resigned, that day. But everything about the staff and their agency changed. With a great deal of struggle, and hard work, they took an honest look at their attitudes and their approach to their work. They reclaimed their integrity, rejoining soul and role.⁴

The same kind of division between soul and role can happen to any kind of organization, workplace, institution, even to the church. When we lose sight of our God-given mission and purpose, we are led astray from our Script and lose faith with the divine drama.

May we heed the call of James to unite our faith and actions that we might live faithful lives of integrity and wholeness. For doers who act will be blessed in their doing. May we do the Word of God so that our actions speak louder and more profoundly than our words.

¹ Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), p. 6.

² Ibid, p. 7.

³ Ivan P. Khovacs, "Theological dramatics," *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. XVII, No. 5, pp. 50-51.

⁴ Esther Armstrong and Dale Stitt, "Integrity – or – Slip Sliding Away," *Journey Into Freedom*, May 2004.

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