



Actions Speak Louder

I Corinthians 2:1-16

William F. Schnell

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One week ago I was in the Central American country of Belize with my daughter riding horses through what she called “the for-real-jungle” on our way to climb to the top of Mayan ruins which reminded me of my rather fitful fear of heights. Next we went ziplining through the rainforest canopy. Then we snorkeled the second largest barrier reef in the world. As Rosanne Rosanna Dana once said, “I thought I was going to die.”

When we returned home I wanted to sleep but instead had to dive right into sermon preparation. Reading the extended text for today I thought, “This is too much.” So we are restricting ourselves to the first five verses. We are also jettisoning the title, as it related to the final verses. We might come up with a new title as we go along, but maybe not. I’m not sure exactly where we are going today, but that is how it often goes when it comes to preaching.

Billy Graham tells of a time, during the early years of his preaching ministry, when he was due to lead a revival in a town in South Carolina, and he needed to mail a letter. He asked a little boy in the main street how he could get to the post office. After the boy had given him directions, Billy said, “If you come to the Central Baptist Church tonight, I’ll tell you how to get to heaven.” The boy replied, “No thanks, you don’t even know how to get to the post office!”

I guess no amount of eloquence or popularity or experience is any guarantee of preaching effectiveness. There was a fellow who attended a wildly well-attended church and made the following comment about the preacher. “That guy is deep. He’s so deep I can’t follow him. I get lost right off the bat. I have no idea what he’s talking about.” I guess it hasn’t occurred to this parishioner that if he can’t make sense of what the preacher is preaching, maybe it doesn’t make any sense at all.

And even if it does make sense, something seems to be real wrong about it when the preacher doesn’t practice what he or she is preaching. This past week there was a news report about a pastor who got caught in bed with a church member. I guess when her husband came home unexpectedly and, enraged by what he found, went to procure a gun, the offending pastor ran the other way completely naked. I watched a clandestinely recorded video of the fellow trying to explain all this to his congregation. It was entertaining, but not particularly edifying.

Better to practice what one preaches and not preach so well than the other way around. This was the approach Paul takes in our text. Writing to a church in Corinth that he helped to gather, Paul reminds them: *When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God* (Verse 1). Paul was the most effective church planter in the ancient church but he was not, by his own admission, a good preacher.

If his writing style offers any clues to his preaching style, he was fond of run-on sentences. In the King James Version of the Bible his letter to the Ephesians begins, after the greeting, with a single sentence that is 240 words long. It is immediately followed by a sentence that contains 167 words. If his speaking was anything like his writing one has to wonder where he came up for air in such a rambling, convoluted style. It is obvious from our text that he knew this about himself.

But he knew something else about himself—that the Lord had called him to preach the gospel and that the Lord would give him the words to say and that the Lord would make him effective so long as he denied himself, took up his cross and followed the Master. Paul continues: *For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling* (Verses 2-3). If you think Jesus was sweating blood in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night when he was betrayed, you should have seen Paul when he stood up to preach with his legs buckling in fear and with much trembling in his hands and weakness in his voice.

But you have to say this about Paul, he dared to go where angels feared to tread. He spoke truth to power when he knew it was going to get him a beating at best and a stoning at worst. He spoke when he was forbidden to speak even though it meant being run out of town at best or incarcerated at worst. Over and over again he was persecuted terribly, but still he spoke out—proclaiming the gospel at every opportunity and even to the jailhouse guards.

That is what Paul did well—he persevered in his faith with an undimmed joy and an undying peace about himself despite the trials and tribulations he had to suffer. And do you know what? People were hungry for that. They wanted what he was eating for breakfast. They wanted joy and peace for themselves because such things had been evading them despite their best efforts to follow the ways of the world. In short, they were drawn to Paul and the Gospel he was preaching.

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power (Verses 4-5). Paul was a demonstrator, not a pontificator. He demonstrated his faith every time he was knocked down for preaching the Gospel and he got back up to preach some more. He demonstrated his faith every time he stood up on his buckling legs and opened his trembling lips. He demonstrated his faith every time he sent a letter from a prison cell in support of illegal Christian congregations. He

was beloved by growing numbers of believers not so much for what he said or wrote, but for what he demonstrated with his life.

I am reminded of a poem by Edgar A. Guest entitled: I'd Rather See a Sermon.

I'd rather see a sermon
than hear one any day;
I'd rather one should walk with me
than merely tell the way.

The eye's a better pupil
and more willing than the ear,
Fine counsel is confusing,
but example's always clear;

And the best of all preachers
are the men who live their creeds,
For to see good put in action
is what everybody needs.

I soon can learn to do it
if you'll let me see it done;
I can watch your hands in action,
but your tongue too fast may run.

And the lecture you deliver
may be very wise and true,
But I'd rather get my lessons
by observing what you do;

For I might misunderstand you
and the high advice you give,
But there's no misunderstanding
how you act and how you live.

I think of Rev. Horak when I read that poem. He's a visual learner. His sermons often have a prop set up on the chancel as a visual illustration of what he is preaching. But the best illustration is who he is. When I was a candidate for this church my mom and dad paid a clandestine visit to scope out the Promised Land and report back to me. While they were walking around the Great Hall or Sanctuary, Rev. Horak came up and introduced himself and asked if they needed any help.

My mom was always a great judge of character. My brother once remarked, "Have you ever noticed how right mom is about negative things?" It was true. If she pointed out somebody as being an odd bird, that is pretty much what they proved to be—and she could size a person up in a matter of seconds. That is why her first impression of Rev.

Horak was so noteworthy. All she said was this: “We met the Associate Pastor, Rev. Horak. He’s a nice man, Bill.” It may not sound like a rousing commendation but, coming from my mom, I assure you she was saying something.

Well, he is a nice man and everybody loves him for it, including me—and I should prefer you loved me and just liked him. He’s a living sermon in his own fashion as Paul was in his. But you may be wondering what a sermon about the likes of St. Paul and Rev. Horak and the Rev. Billy Graham—preachers all—has to do with the likes of you. How is this message relevant for folks who have not gone to seminary or stood in the pulpit to preach the Gospel?

Peter said all Christians were a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). John wrote that we were made to be priests to serve God (Revelation 1:6). Paul himself wrote to the Philippians: *In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And he encourages them to stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you... for it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him...* (Philippians 1:4-5&-27-29).

So you, too, are called to be walking witnesses and living testimonies of the Gospel. There is a quote attributed to St. Francis: “Preach the Good News at all times. If necessary, use words.” You may not be called to go stand on the street corner and preach, or to stand in the pulpit and preach, but you are called to be living sermons of what is true and right and good as God gives you light to see it and the opportunity to embody it. The world is not always going to reward you for doing or saying the right thing. Sometimes it is going to crucify you for it.

But there are eyes watching you. Maybe it’s your children or your friends or your co-workers or your fellow church members. They are wondering if your faith is fake or the real deal. What are they going to see in you—a person who practices what she preaches or a person running scared and naked like that philandering preacher in the news this past week? Looking ahead, and knowing your actions over the next 24 hours were part of that new sermon, what might you do differently?

About seven months ago I preached a message entitled: “The Gospel According to You.” In it was a poem. Two of its verses bear repeating as we conclude today’s message.

You are writing each moment a letter to all;
Take care that the writing is true.
It’s the only gospel some people will read –
The gospel according to you.

You are writing a gospel, a chapter each day,
By the deeds that you do, by the words that you say.
Others read what you write, and they watch carefully too.
Say, what is the gospel according to you?