

Faith in Action

November 12, In the Year of Our LORD, 2006

Gates Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Mark 12:38-44 and James 1:22-25; 2:14-17, 24

Professor Henry Higgins and his words – *all* to be pronounced in a *precise* way Freddy Eyensford-Hill and his words of love As tiring for the audience is “the rain in Spain fall[ing] mainly on the plain,” Eliza Doolittle finally had enough of the Professor’s arrogance and Freddy’s fawning! No wonder her outburst in song with the words printed on the front of our worship bulletin!

Words! Words! Words! I’m so sick of words! I get words all day through; first from him, now from you! Is that all you blighters can do? ... Make me no undying vow. Show me now! Sing me no song! Read me no rhyme! Don’t waste my time, show me!

Just think how happy most of us were when this past week’s Election Day came and went and we were finally rid of all the words,

- words, mostly recorded, sometimes live, in telephone calls,
- words, sometimes harsh, often bending the truth, in TV and radio commercials,
- words, usually a nuisance, that filled many e-mail in-boxes.

How we must have wanted to join Eliza and sing “Words! Words! Words! I’m so sick of words!”

And now, after the election, we are treated to different words. There were gracious words from both the defeated and the victors, plenty of words about bi-partisanship and working together, words that kindle at least a flicker of hope that cooperation and consensus and reconciliation are possible. Far too many of us are pessimistic and think bi-partisanship won’t actually come to fruition. My Bachelor’s Degree was in Government was grounded in “realpolitik,” how, despite all the great theories, government really works – or doesn’t. Still, can we not hope that bitterness end, calm be restored, and that our elected officials might govern in humble ways that serve the needs of us all?

The bottom line is that if words are only ... words ... said without deeds to prove their intent in fact and action, we should not be surprised if pessimism, despair and cynicism win and prevail. The skit this morning showed that although Sandra and Shannon expressed concern for Connor’s need for a coat and some bread, their words were empty! As nice as they were, their intent was not genuine enough to do something about his plight. Even though Shannon had three coats and Sandra had more than enough bread, they said they would pray for him. They wished him well and simply walked on! How that echoes the words from James chosen for our stewardship challenge this year! From the New International Version, we hear the words this way:

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

James 2:15-17

When we make promises, are people not to expect we will keep them as best we can? Human frailty and brokenness notwithstanding, is it too much to ask that we try hard to accomplish that which we say we will? In the fifty-fifth chapter of Isaiah, God asserts:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is My word that goes out from My mouth: It will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. Isaiah 55:10-11

Made in the image of God, challenged to live as close to God's ways, expectations, visions and dreams as we can, the last sentence of God's claim is significant:

So is My word that goes out from My mouth: It will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

Likewise, Jesus speaks to how members of His family, the church, do more than listen to words, that they, in turn, put those words into practice. In the eighth chapter of Luke, Jesus says:

"No one lights a lamp and hides it in a jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, he puts it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light." ... Now Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him, but they were not able to get near him because of the crowd. Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you." He replied, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice." Luke 8:16, 19-21

So here we are – at the crux of the issue if not at the foot of the cross, a visceral reminder of Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf. We hear God's words of challenge and then look into our hearts and souls and minds and see if we, to the best of our ability, really put those words into action, whether we do as we say and practice what we preach. How stinging the words from our Gospel Lesson can be! In the first part of the lesson, we read how harshly Jesus spoke of the scribes of His day who were more interested in the esteem they thought their due and how they sought to enrich themselves at the expense of others. Coming after so many of His teachings about service to others, how the first would be last, and the ways of sacrifice, for Jesus to condemn the scribes comes as no surprise ... but we need to take care lest we, too, deserve to be denounced for putting our needs, our ego, and our wants ahead of everyone else at the expenses of our souls and our relationship with God. In the second part of the reading, Jesus contrasted the giving of those who had much to that of the poor widow who gave her last coins – not so much as a criticism of the former but to affirm the degree to which the widow put God first in her life and gave her all.

Just think of those who hear words, make promises and then put those pledges of allegiance into practice! Think of the military veterans we honored this weekend – and those who serve in today's military – of their promises made on behalf of what all of us hold dear – promises put into practice if not sacrificially so. On Veterans' Days, do we not all the more remember those who served and serve and in particular those who went and never returned, those who went and returned injured or maimed, those who went and returned safely and those whose families sacrificed in their absence and in all too many cases lost loved ones?

Now think of veterans of the cross, those who served or continue to serve Christ's church so well – often working behind the scenes to do for others, give for others and sacrifice so that others might know some of the blessings of life so many of us take for granted or think is our due. And

there are so many ways we can put our words into practice and in so doing be claimed by Christ as part of Christ's family. This year's bright yellow Time and Talent Sheet is replete with ways people of Gates Presbyterian Church can put their faith into action. We want people to pray about this sheet – to fill it out as though you have never done so before – first because we make no assumption people want to continue to serve as they have in the past – but more importantly, because your Stewardship Team thinks God wants each of us to stretch a little, look beyond the scope of what we have done before to some new ways to practice our faith, involve ourselves in additional activities and ways of service, and discover the wonder that comes in embracing new tasks, new adventures, new opportunities and new challenges. God does not want any of us to be static, to merely embrace the status quo. Instead, we would stretch the wings of our imagination, stretch our minds, stretch our faith and do more than wonder what we can do. God invites us to find new ways to put our faith into action.

Similarly, be it the pledge card for the campaign to pay for the new roof or the one that invites us to look at our stewardship of monies for the church's mission and ministry in 2007, each of us needs to take a step back and think anew, think through our promises – and then be intentional about our commitment to the work of our God as accomplished in and from this wonderful place. Remember the questions we asked when persons become members of this congregation?

- Who is your LORD and Savior?
- Do you trust in Him?
- Do you intend to be His disciples, to obey His words and show His love?
- Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, giving of yourself in every way, and will you seek the fellowship of the church wherever you may be?

Presumably, when we answered that Jesus Christ is our LORD and Savior, that we trust in Him, intend to be His disciples, obey His word, show His love, be faithful members of this congregation, give ourselves in every way and seek the fellowship of the church wherever we may be, we were doing more than just uttering words – that the words were not empty, that they would, in turn, be accomplished and that we would put them into practice.

To be sure, some people are better equipped to give of their time, all of us are gifted differently which means different talents to share, and all of us have financial realities that impact our family budgets. In this day and age, there is no specific percentage required of us by our God, but there is an expectation that we will be intentional in our decision making of what we promise and what we give of our time, our talent and our treasure. Otherwise, the words of our promises to God are empty, meaningless, devoid of the truth, and one cannot help but wonder if God would echo Eliza Doolittle's frustration:

Words! Words! Words! I'm so sick of words! I get words all day through; first from him, now from you! Is that all you blighters can do? ... Make me no undying vow. Don't waste my time, show me!

Let us not waste God's time or God's love! Let us show God what we believe by how we care and by what we do! Let us show God that our promises are more than just words! Let us put the faith we profess into action! In so doing, God will be well pleased!

Amen!