

“Actions Speak Louder Than Words”

September 6, 2009

James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

This sermon was preached by Pastor Jim Page at Trinity Lutheran Church

With the dawn of the new season of autumn comes the excitement, the energy, and the sacred and holy movement of football season. Since training camp in August, analysts at ESPN have studied various teams in the National Football League. Co-workers have developed their teams for the office fantasy football leagues. College football comes with a heightened energy from student bodies.

High school football teams are preparing for the Friday night games at Carson Park, and of course-the rivalry between the Vikings and the Packers is at a heightened level.

For some of you this is an exciting time of year...for others, you could care less. Regardless of what side of the spectrum you may be on, there is a characteristic within this time of year for which all can concur.

That characteristic is people wearing caps, shirts or jerseys with their team's logo and colors on game day and perhaps during the week. Our actions such as what we wear, convey our support when words do not suffice.

In our scripture readings this morning God's word teaches us the importance of this pervasive human trait that actions speaking louder than words in living out our faith.

Throughout daily life, we often witness the classic human trait in that we are tribal. Dating back to the dawn of human history with Adam and Eve clamoring in the Garden of Eden out of fear for God's wrath...our human tendency is to group together for strength, security and growth. We soon identify with, and support, groups, movements, and belief systems that we affirm.

The subsequent result is the notion to look out for our own. To protect what we believe and cherish is viable and essential for our well-being. We see this in sports where teammates

stand up for each other, within town hall meetings as supporters gather together in the growing debate on health care in our country, and obviously as we care for our families and friends.

The question we can ask ourselves...is how do we determine what group we are in? With whom do we associate on a regular basis? In asking this, we get to a foundational problem for many of us...and that is, people problems in how we relate to others.

With the mindset of schools starting this past week, there was once a teacher of ten and eleven year old boys in Germany who would begin class by taking off his hat and bow before them. “Why do you do that?” a young boy in the class asked him.

He answered, “Who knows what one of you may become.”

One of those boys was Martin Luther, the man who sparked the Reformation that changed the world while also beginning the Lutheran church.

That teacher addressed everyone in the same fashion.

The book of James addresses the dynamic of people relating to others by the powerful sentence, “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” The New English Bible calls it ‘snobbery’. The original translation is a compound word that means ‘to receive’ and ‘to face’. In essence, to receive someone at face value.

That is a common social disease receiving people at face value; exhibiting an element of favoritism of some over others.

We need to ask ourselves, how do we regard others? I believe there are five key ways for doing so.

The common first standard is by

appearance...how do they look? How are they dressed? Dress is a key element as parents dress their children, teens dress to be cool and 'fit in' in school, and adults (generally speaking) tend to dress for success. Are others good looking by societies standards of looks and name brand items?

This element isn't too pervasive, but ancestry...nationality, race, or ethnic background.

Age...brings various impressions by others.

Achievement...our society loves the winners and forgets the losers. The more you've done compared to others...the better.

The most common distinction...affluence...judging people by their wealth and the status that results from such wealth.

We have these various factors yet the key element is that favoritism is incompatible with the Christian life.

As Paul wrote in Romans 2:11, "For God shows no favoritism." Here in lies the shocking nature of Christianity wherein all distinctions and all boundaries are removed for the sake of the life-giving message given by God through Jesus Christ.

It is this message that runs up against our normal pace of daily life. A pace where we look out for those who are like us or feel threatened by those who are different. Divisions result, or cliques develop be they at groups within schools, between co-workers in the workplace; between those who have made decisions which may not be in align with another's value system, and even in the family system fractured by division among relatives.

In all of Christ's life and ministry, favoritism was a primary factor he sought to overcome in sharing his life-giving message. Favoritism that was based on gender, economic class, martial and religious status.

Today, in this powerful story from the gospel of Mark, Jesus encounters a woman who is pleading for the health and wholeness of her daughter. Any parent would do the same and I can't fathom the anguish

she must have felt.

To add insult to injury, she has everything against her in the eyes of others:

She's of the wrong gender, wrong religion as a Gentile and not a part of God's chosen people, wrong race of Syrophoenician origin, her daughter is demon-possessed which was obviously shunned-believed to have been the product of some grave sin, and the mother is alone...no father or husband present in a male-dominated culture.

You don't get any lower on the social scale. No situation as bad as this.

During the depression, Charles Darrow could find no work. Although he was broke and his wife was expecting a baby, he wasn't discouraged. Every evening they played a game which he had devised. Remembering happy vacations in nearby Atlantic City, he laid out his own little boardwalk on a square piece of cardboard and pretended to be rich. On his "properties" he put miniature houses and hotels he had carved out of small pieces of wood. The game, called Monopoly, was later marketed by Parker Brothers and made Darrow a multi-millionaire.

The woman here is greatly discouraged while envisioning greatness for her daughter and she knew Christ could bring that to reality.

Jesus' response to her plea has baffled Christians throughout the ages when he said, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." What did Jesus just say? How rude to say such a thing to a mother pleading for her daughter's health!

When God rattles our cages, so to speak, when God open our eyes to see, our ears to hear, and our hearts to receive a vital lesson for our lives...we encounter a divine presence that can be startling and unsettling. Jesus did shocking things...in the gospel of Matthew 21 he first cleared out the temple and by toppling over the tables and money...he showed others the key element of worshipping God in God's

house; he then cursed a fig tree and it withered to show the power of faith to do more powerful acts for God.

In such unsettling times, we may not truly understand what God is doing but our faith rests in that goodness will result.

When Jesus made such a seemingly rude comment, the woman persisted, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

In such a powerful statement, she was pleading, attempting to erase, crumble, and remove all human-made barriers of division that hindered God's goodness.

In an unrelenting approach, we encounter in the scriptures a God who asks each of us, "Where is the good news for your neighbor?"

Actions speak louder than words. We can say we have faith, that we believe in Jesus Christ, that we pray, that we are present within worship. All are fine spiritual disciplines and I hope you continue with such means to nurture your faith. Yet, our actions speak more of our faith than do our words. James stated perfectly, "Faith without works is dead."

Works, acts of mercy and grace lived out in response to God's gracious act.

Let's look again at that great act of grace and love. It's stated in the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. And the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth. From his fullness, we have all received grace upon grace."

This is where I ask all of you...where have you seen God's glory?

In the joy of a friendship, love of a child or grandchild, a pleasant walk outdoors.

I ask this since it is God's glory that continues to surround us in subtle, profound ways amid the divisions we witness and experience. It is that glory that gives us hope.

Amid the greatest division of humankind, Jesus' death on the cross

caused by favoritism of incomprehensible proportions, that we share in witnessing the glory and new life in his resurrection.

As we enter into this week, let us join together in having our actions speak louder than words by living out the following:

Accepting everybody...as it states in Romans "Accept each other as Christ accepted you." Acceptance is hard because it's often confused with approval. You can accept someone without approving of their lifestyle. Continue to cultivate an attitude of acceptance for others as the people they are as children of God.

Appreciate everybody...this is a little further than acceptance. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourself." (Philippians 2:35) Find something you like, and not simply accept, about others. People are unique, value them for their God-given gifts and quirks

Finally, **affirm everybody.** "Encourage one another and build each other up." (1 Thessalonians 5:11) Be an encourager, not a complainer, critic or judge. You can encourage simply be smiling at another. That's what I hope we continue to nurture here at Trinity in a welcoming atmosphere were first impressions are made by simple smiles. Great power rests in building others up for both their benefit and yours.

Actions indeed speak louder than words as we accept, appreciate and affirm others. In living out our faith in subtle yet powerful ways, God's kingdom is witnessed, lives are touched in uplifting ways, and goodness is shared.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.