

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 16th Sunday after Pentecost, Sept. 28, 2014

Do You Talk the Walk?

Dr. Kenneth Humphreys

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Matthew 21:23-32

You have probably heard the expression, “Talk the Walk” and its alternate “Walk the Talk” but you may not really understand what these expressions mean.

“Walk the Talk” simply means “be consistent.” Do what you say you are going to do. This is simply good management. It is not disruptive. It doesn’t rock the boat.

“Talk the Walk” shakes thing up. You act first and then follow up with words consistent with your actions. It is disruptive but when others see your actions put into words, they tend to follow your example because they better see the value of your actions. Another way of phrasing it is “Do more. Talk less.”

In our gospel reading, the chief priests and elders are masters of “Walking the Talk.” They are totally consistent. They follow the party line. They don’t like anyone rocking the boat and Jesus was rocking it very hard. He was “Talking the Walk,” not the other way around. He wasn’t doing what he was expected to do. He wasn’t following the rules in the eyes of the priests and elders. He was promoting controversy and was being challenged.

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you the authority?” they asked. Clearly they are once again trying to trap Jesus into answering in a manner which was contrary to the rules, at least the rules as they interpreted them. They wanted just another reason for them to try to get rid of this pesky rabbi from Nazareth, a guy who refused to “Walk the Talk.”

How does he respond? He takes a totally unexpected action by asking a question himself rather than answering their question. He turns the tables on them as he has done many times before. He asks, “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”

You need to understand that in Jesus time, questions asked by the priests and elders were appropriate. They were the leaders of the Jewish faith and were responsible for upholding the Law as expressed in the Torah, the first five books of the

Old Testament. As the ones responsible for the faith, morals and institutional life of Judaism, their question was appropriate. They were “Walking the Talk,” that is the Law.

Jesus in their eyes is doing all sorts of things which they believed were contrary to the Law, not the least of which was the disruption of the temple and the overturning of the tables of the peddlers and money changers. They want to know why Jesus has been doing these things and upon what authority.

What do they get as a response to their question? Not an answer but a question in return, a question for which they have no answer. As our Gospel passage states, if they had answered that the baptism of John came from heaven, Jesus would in turn ask why they did not believe John. If it was from heaven and they denied it, they themselves would be put in the position of not following the Law. On the other hand, if they said baptism by John was of human origin, the crowd would rebel against them because the people believed that John was a prophet. Catch-22. They couldn't answer and Jesus simply told them that if they would not answer his question, he would not answer theirs either.

The priests and elders were in a box much like that of a politician who is asked a sticky question on a controversial topic. No matter how the question is answered, votes would be lost. So the safe thing to do is stick with the party line or evade the issue altogether.

Jesus then comes back at the priests and elders and takes the offensive with a series of parables. Parables were a very key part of teachings of Jesus. *“Jesus’ parables are seemingly simple and memorable stories, often with imagery, and all convey messages. Scholars have commented that although these parables seem simple, the messages they convey are deep, and central to the teachings of Jesus.”* (Wikipedia). Our Gospel reading is the Parable of the Two Sons. I will be discussing other parables in the coming weeks.

This week's parable is restated in Eugene Peterson's wonderful Bible paraphrase, *The Message*, as follows:

“Tell me what you think of this story: A man had two sons. He went up to the first and said, ‘Son, go out for the day and work in the vineyard.’

The son answered, ‘I don’t want to.’ Later he thought better of it and went.

The father gave the same command to the second son. He answered, 'Sure, glad to.' But he never went.

Which of the two sons did what the father asked?"

Those of you who have children can probably relate to this story. Sometimes children will grumble and not want to do what they are asked to do by their parents. They might throw a tantrum, particularly if they are very young, but more often than not they obey, at least hopefully they will.

It is a far worse situation if they say, "OK mom or dad," never intending to obey. The consequences to them would be harsh in most households.

So, on balance, the first child would end up doing as asked, albeit reluctantly, and the other one might be nursing a sore ego.

That is the answer the priests and elders gave to Jesus' question, "The first."

Jesus ends the parable and again turns the tables on his adversaries by saying, again in the Bible paraphrase by Eugene Peterson,

"Yes, and I tell you that crooks and whores are going to precede you into God's kingdom. John came to you showing you the right road. You turned up your noses at him, but the crooks and whores believed him. Even when you saw their changed lives, you didn't care enough to change and believe him."

Perry H. Biddle says that *"the thrust of the parable...is that the man represents God and the sons represent...two groups of people..., the sinners and the righteous. While both groups are children of God, the difference between them is revealed not in times of piety (the priests and elders) or profession (the tax collectors and prostitutes) but in terms of acts done or omitted."*

Do you know or have you known of anyone who faithfully comes to church or who strongly professes his or her faith in God but who turns out not to be the kind of person he or she appears to be? I am sure you can remember politicians who have strongly professed their faith and have been exposed as frauds, who have been caught in infidelity, criminal acts, or worse. They put on an outward face of piety but inwardly are not at all what they seemed to be. John Edwards is one who comes immediately to mind.

On the other side of the spectrum are those who were thieves, wife beaters, con artists, and more but who turned their lives around and turned to God and who are now upstanding citizens and deeply faithful Christians.

In his parable, Jesus is telling the priests and elders that they are like the first group – they are wearing their piety on their sleeves. They did not believe what John told them and change their ways. They are not really doing the work of the Lord.

The tax collectors and harlots who believed John and obeyed his word and repented are the ones who will be saved, long before the priests and elders.

Kenneth Sauer, a United Methodist pastor, in a sermon on today's Gospel reading said:

“Would the most reviled of sinners feel welcome and loved in our churches?

Would drug addicts, prostitutes, those who have lived with multiple partners, those who have addiction problems, the homeless, the mentally ill, the depressed, the marginalized, those who have spent time in prison feel welcomed and loved unconditionally?

Would they know that we love them just the way they are - sin, warts and all – no matter what their lifestyles, no matter what their appearance, no matter what is in their bank accounts - would they know we love them just the way they are?

...Do they see Christ in you, in me (or) when they see our churches, drive by them - do they think we are such a bunch of hypocrites or loving, inclusive, non-judgmental sinners – saved by grace – but in no means – stuck up or holier than Thou?”

Rev. Sauer concluded that sermon with:

“Let's get our priorities straight. Let's do what we can to have food on the table, and a roof over our heads, but when it comes to all the extra gadgets and the neighborhoods with locked gates – we would all do well to go on a diet!! ...

Many of our neighbors are ... going through divorce or abuse.

They may be contemplating suicide.

They are on the verge of bankruptcy and on the verge of losing their homes.

They are lonely.

They are isolated.

They need Jesus, just like we do.”

Some Christians just “Walk the Talk’ – they read their Bibles, regularly attend church and Sunday school and pray for others, but do not put the words of Jesus into action.

Jesus has told us to “Talk the Walk.” Reach out to the poor, the down trodden, the lonely, the isolated, those in our midst who we have tended to avoid - all those who need what Christ has to offer.

Amen!