



09-27-2020 Embracing Self-Emptying
Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Psalm 25:1-9; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

“Actions speak louder than words.” The saying goes. A well-articulated argument may win the day but much clearer than words is the message that comes from actions. As long as you mean the things that you say, following through shouldn’t be too difficult. Walking the talk, we know, is more important than talking the talk. How often have we realized that in times of grief a silent hug is much more meaningful than what we may say. And how many times have we heard that “Talk is cheap, but actions speak.”?

A person is held in high regard if she practices what she preaches and follows true on her promises. In fact, this is what I understand to be the meaning of Jesus’ injunction that “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”¹

Novelist Aleksandra Layland zeros in when she explains that “Actions speak louder than words. Words cost nothing. Actions can cost everything.”² She might have as well been thinking of Jesus’ admonition when she remarked “I always knew a good man should do no bad deeds, but it never occurred to me that a good man must do good deeds. He cannot just sit back and do nothing. He cannot just relax and let things happen around him. He must act or his faith is meaningless, mere words or thoughts.”³ Indeed, how we act tells us who we really are and what we are made of.

In today’s gospel, the chief priests and the elders question Jesus’ authority. What precedes this passage is Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem and his violent overturning of the tables in the Temple. The cohort of the Temple leaders seems to be asking: “Who did and put you in charge?” Jesus is shrewd in responding with a question of his own. In his verbal sparring, he is raising questions about power: who has it, where does it come from, and how is it maintained? In a way, the questions have been hinted at in the past. In fact, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, one petition has to do with doing the will of God (Matthew 6:10). In another moment, it is because his intention is to do God’s will that at the end of his sermon on the Mount (7:28-29), Jesus is said to have preached with authority greater than that of the scribes. The will of the Father is all he wanted to adhere to in his prayer in the Gethsemane (26:42). At the end of the gospel, Jesus recognizes that authority has been given him by the heavenly Father and it is by that authority that he sends his disciples out to announce the good news of the kingdom (28:18-20).⁴ But bowing to the will of God is not what the chief priests and the elders are willing to do. They hang on the horns of a dilemma. The question concerning John the Baptist is a clue to the answer Jesus would have given, had his questioners been open to the truth. If they truly

¹ Matthew 7:21, see also the following verses.

² Aleksandra Layland, *Of Wisdom and Valor: The Art of War. The Path of Peace.*

³ _____, *Ansgar: The Struggle of a People. The Triumph of the Heart.*

⁴ See other challenges to his authority in Matthew 9:32-34; 12:22-32; 22:15-22; 22:23-33; 22:34-40; and 22:41-46.



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understood what John was about (see Matthew 3:11-17), they would know where Jesus gets the authority to say what he is saying and do what he was doing. But because they are not open to the truth, he lets a parable drive home the truth.

The parable of the two sons is a recognizable one. Who did the will of his father: the son who begged off and then showed up, or the one who said he would do the work and didn't?

Speaking for myself, I know I have at times agreed to doing something only to forget about it later or, even worse, I have changed my mind because I could not see the need for it. At other times, I have done what I was asked to do only out of guilt or fear of retribution even though I had originally said "No" to it. Yet, generally speaking, I have also been able to say "No" when I meant "No" and "Yes" when I meant "Yes." (Mt. 5:37)

In sharing the parable, Jesus goes on to underscore the fact that they have chosen to ignore John's message and, therefore, Jesus himself. The irony of that truth is that even people whose daily lives seem to be a big "No!" to God believe John's message of repentance and renewal. What does it say that even tax collectors and prostitutes "get it," when those who should most welcome the Messiah refuse to see God at work?

Those whose life choices give us ample reasons to feel disgust and are an evident scandal to righteous living are lifted up as the ones making the wisest choice. The priests and elders who challenged Jesus are castigated for not reconsidering their ways. What does it take to change one's mind, to step out in courage and faith into a new way of understanding the world? Where do we struggle to change our minds—holding onto exclusivist beliefs, judgmental practices, resentful grudges, arrogant prejudices, and half-truths that no longer serve us well? Is it possible that we let stubbornness and pride sip the life out of our soul to the point of witnessing those we despise most have a fuller life in God? Is it possible that we favor bitterness and resentment more than the freedom that comes by admitting of being wrong and choosing a more truthful and honorable way?

The chief priests and the elders question Jesus' authority because they feel threatened in their own authority. If they allow for Jesus' actions to continue, they fear they will lose their grip on the people. It is because they are not able to justify and maintain their authority in the eyes of the people that they resort to the punishment of the cross at the end. Matthew seems to point out not so much Jesus' divine power as the source and nature of that power. Jesus possesses that power only because it is granted to him. It is a power tapped into by doing God's will. Jesus' authority is not only more powerful than worldly authority, but it is all together of a different kind. Jesus' authority is obtained through humility and faithful obedience to the will of God until the end and is fully based on the Law of Love. Jesus becomes the vehicle for God's



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power that heals, reconciles, and restores community in evident opposition to the worldly power that abuses, violates, and creates division.

“Chief priests and elders of the people” is an ironic ascription; it is evident that they are neither faithful nor wise leaders and as such do not represent the people; instead they both fear and seek to manipulate the crowds to carry out their will (21:26, 46; 26:3-5; 27:20). Their words and actions do not liberate nor heal but only keep the people captive to the system. A prophetic voice can only bring subversion to the system and the leaders do not favor another popular rebellion: there is too much at stake: the privileged cannot let their lifestyle and the status quo to be upset. If Jesus becomes the subversive champion of the poor and marginalized through the healing and cleansing, the restoration of sight and the table fellowship with the sinners than he must be neutralized, and his credibility made a public show. Somehow, the leaders think, his authority must be opposed, ridiculed, and delegitimized.

But their plan backfires. The leaders are well aware of the “two sons” tradition that runs through the spiritual story of Israel starting with Able and Cain and continuing with Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Aaron and Moses, and David and his brothers—a tradition laden with motifs of envy and betrayal, struggles for power, and sometimes reconciliation. The leaders know that Jesus is not talking about two fictitious brothers; he is challenging them to see themselves in the story: they have ignored John and refused to accept Jesus and by so doing they have clearly opposed God’s invitation to reform. Their action, or better their inaction, reveals where they stand and what they truly believe. They have reached a level of status and comfort they are not willing to give up. They are not about God’s Word and God’s people. They are about themselves, and their unwillingness to repent and lose their grip on power means that they are deaf and blind if not even actually willing to miss out on life (Mt. 10:39; 16:25).

The ancient church has understood and celebrated Jesus’ self-emptying pattern. That pattern is being passed on to us as our opportunity to encounter God. The second chapter of Paul’s letter to the Philippians is a prime example of that. In it, Paul describes, with words borrowed from an older hymn, the trajectory of God’s saving love. By renouncing his divine status and power and embracing a human status with humility and simplicity, the Son of God demonstrated what is required of us: voluntary submission to the Father’s will. Such a submission will operate in us the similarity of the Christ-mind that will allow us to shift from an ego-centric stance to total hospitality and fellowship even with the estranged other. This self-emptying pattern is what will allow us to take on the mind of Christ and to put the interests of others at the front and center (Phil. 2:4).



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How can Jesus' Way of humility, simplicity, and faithful obedience to the will of God aid us in loving our neighbors? Whom do we identify as the totally "other," the prostitutes and tax collectors in our lives? What mind shift, what openness of heart is God requiring of us? What attitude, judgment, beliefs, and mind-blocks do we need to shed or empty ourselves of in order to apply God's Law of Love? Are we willing to embrace a lower status and even suffering and death to be met with new life in God?

May the Good Lord assist us on our self-emptying journey. Amen.