

Suiting Action to Word

Ephesians 6:10-20; Luke 6:46-49

Text:

“Why call ye me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not the things I command you?” Luke 6:46

Years ago I heard a seasoned Jesuit tell a parable, the story of a wise man who used to say *yes* when he wanted to say *yes* and *no* when he wanted to say *no*. Somehow his tongue became stuck in his mouth, and when he wanted to say *yes*, he actually said *no*; and when he wanted to say *no* he actually said *yes*. So, discovering that he was in trouble, a small bird came to him in a dream one night and told him how to find the Wise Man Who Is Wiser than he, who certainly would help him.

So the Wise Man set out to locate the Wise Man Who Is Wiser than he. After a long journey day and night with no discovery, the Wise Man lay down to sleep. The small bird came to him again, and said, “You are in the land of the Wise Man Who Is Wiser than you. Simply search for him and you will find him.” Soon, to his great delight, the Wise Man discovered the Wise Man Who Is Wiser than he, and requested his help.

But unfortunately the Wise Man Who Is Wiser than he, who used to say *certainly, certainly, certainly*, had begun—after his tongue had become stuck in his mouth—to say only *maybe, maybe, maybe*. Obviously, the Wise Man Who Is Wiser than he was also in trouble.

The author of the allegory observed that a wise man with greater wisdom who is in trouble is incapable of helping a wise man of lesser wisdom who is in trouble. Then the Jesuit Priest offered this astounding moral to the parable: *as the Church of Jesus Christ, we have begun to swallow the truths rather than to speak them.*¹

If we take this fable seriously, it follows that anywhere, in any situation, in any circumstance, where we personally and silently conform to flagrant injustice, conspicuous unfairness, demeaning prejudice, crass opportunism, we have lost a significant battle for the Christ of equality, justice, mercy and love.

Suit the Action to the Word

Repeatedly, in churches throughout the world, Christians stand to **say** what we **believe**: The Apostle’s Creed—*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord . . .*ⁱⁱ The Nicene Creed—*And he shall come again with glory to judge the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end. . .*ⁱⁱⁱ The Confession of ’67—*He gave history its meaning and direction and called the church to be his servant for the reconciliation of the world.*^{iv}

Easily, fluently, we say what we believe. Our recurring and immediate challenge, however, is to do what we say..... not to swallow the truths but to speak them; not only to speak the truths but to enact them; and to suit the action to the word.

Hamlet prepares a play to catch the conscience of the king, and—in his direction to the players—he exhorts the actors:

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue. . . . let your own discretion be your tutor: suit the action to the word, the word to the action....^v

The Apostle Paul maintains the same point of view with a different twist: *Be strong in the Lord*, insists Paul, *and in the strength of his power*. In other words, stand firm in the Lord and with the strength of his power do what you say you believe.

We know that Paul consistently confronted the principalities and powers of his day on a regular basis, and his action was consistent with his word. Shortly after his arrival in Jerusalem, Paul was arrested on account of a tumult resulting from his final efforts to conciliate the Jewish Christians. The hearing of his case was delayed continually, which was not an uncommon occurrence under the emperors; this meant that he had to remain in chains, in military custody, his right hand chained to the left hand of the soldier who guarded him. While he was permitted to reside in his own hired lodging and to hold conversations freely with his friends and visitors, he was a prisoner, *an ambassador in chains*.^{vi}

This ambassador in chains issues no admonition which he himself is unwilling to follow. Out the caldron of his vast calamities—literally, of trials and tribulations—Paul declares encouragement to the churches and to us:

Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God.....

It is self-evident that on every day of his captivity the apostle scrutinized the Roman soldier to whom he was chained. Every day Paul saw the soldier's belt around his waist, on which hung his sword; shoes to protect his feet in the field of battle; a shield on his arm to guard against fiery arrows, the enemy's javelin or the rivals' blows; and most assuredly a helmet for his head. Scrupulously, the apostle incorporates the tools of the soldier's warfare as metaphors for the Christian's armor and defense against the evils of the day:

*Therefore **take up** the whole armor of God... **fasten** the belt of truth around your waist; **put on** the breastplate of righteousness; as shoes, **put on** whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace; **take** the shield of faith; **take** the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*^{vii}

Notice that these are all action words: *take up, fasten, put on, put on, take and take!* Paul was in the Nike mentality long before Nike ever expressed it: *Just do it!* and all of this in order to stand firm, not to compromise, not to swallow the truth but to speak the truth, not to forfeit the truth but to do the truth.

The Loss of Leadership

Last February A Few Good Men—the men of the Monday morning men's group— read Lee Iacocca's book titled *Where Have All the Leaders Gone?* Iacocca composed a list that he named the "Nine C's of Leadership," which describe the essential characteristics of leaders at the top, traits that apply to leaders in political, economic, educational, and religious arenas. Two of those C's are *courage* and *conviction*. "If you're a politician," writes Iacocca, "*courage* means taking a position even when you know it will cost you votes. . . To be a leader you've got to have *conviction*—a fire in your belly. You've got to have passion. You've got to really want to get something done."^{viii} To Iacocca's list of "Nine C's of Leadership," I would personally add *Congruity*. Courage and Conviction—that is, the courage of one's conviction—must be based on the congruency of action and word: the strong, effective leader will *suit the action to the word, the word to the action*.

I'll remind us of what you and I already know: the temptations and the pressures to compromise in every professional or work arena in our society are enormous, Gargantuan, often looming larger than life, whether those marketplaces are business or banking, government or politics, hospital or university, mills or factories, farms or ranches, churches or judicatories, courts or judicial systems, public schools or private schools: high schools, middle schools, elementary schools. You and I—all of us from the oldest to the youngest among us—are confronted by the temptations and the pressures to compromise the truths to which we hold tenaciously.

Be strong in the Lord, Paul admonishes us, and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of a world of debilitating deceit and calculating compromise.

We stand and say what we believe. Our preeminent task as Christians is to **do** what we **say** we believe, suiting action to the word.

Why Don't We?

One more story before I leave: a narrative by Hugh Price Hughes, titled *The City of Everywhere*:

This is the tale of a man who might have been I, for I dreamed of journeying to that metropolis. I arrived early one morning. It was cold, there were flurries of snow on the ground and as I stepped from the train to the platform I noticed that the baggage man and the Red Cap were warmly attired in heavy coats and gloves, but oddly enough, they wore no shoes. My initial impulse was to ask the reason for this odd practice, but repressing it I passed into the station and inquired the way to the hotel. My curiosity, however, was immediately enhanced by the discovery that no one in the station wore any shoes. Boarding the streetcar, I saw that my fellow travelers were likewise barefoot, and upon arriving at the hotel I found that the bell hop, the clerk and the habitués (or residents) of the place were all devoid of shoes.

Unable to restrain myself longer, I asked the ingratiating manager what the practice meant.

“What practice?” said he.

“Why,” said I, pointing to his bare feet, “why don't you wear any shoes in this town?”

“Ah,” said he, “that is just it. Why don't we?”

“What is the matter, don't you believe in shoes?”

“Believe in shoes, my friend! I should say we do. That is the first article of our creed, shoes. They are indispensable to the well being of humanity. Such chilblains (inflammations), cuts, sores, suffering as shoes prevent! It is wonderful!”

“Well, then, why don't you wear them?” said I, bewildered.

“Ah,” said he, thoughtfully, “that's just it. Why don't we?”

Though considerably nonplused I checked in, secured my room and went directly to the coffee shop and deliberately sat down by an amiable gentlemen who likewise conformed to the conventions of his fellow citizens. He wore no shoes. Friendly enough, he suggested after we had eaten, that we look about the city. The first thing we noticed upon emerging from the hotel was a huge brick structure of impressive proportions. To this he pointed with pride.

“You see that?” said he. “That is one of our outstanding shoe manufacturing establishments!”

“A what?” I asked in amazement. “You mean you make shoes there?”

“Well, not exactly,” said he, a bit abashed, “we talk about making shoes there, and believe me, we have got one of the most brilliant young fellows you have ever heard. He talks most thrillingly and convincingly every week on this great subject of shoes. He has the most

persuasive and appealing way. Just yesterday he moved the people profoundly with his exposition of the necessity of shoe wearing. Many broke down and wept. It was really wonderful.”

“But why don’t they wear them?” said I insistently.

“Ah,” said he, putting his hand upon my arm and looking wistfully into my eyes, “That is just it. Why don’t we?”

Just then as we turned down a side street I saw through a cellar window a cobbler actually making a pair of shoes. Excusing myself from my friend, I burst into the little shop and asked the shoemaker how it happened that his shop was not overrun with customers. Said he, “Nobody wants my shoes, they just talk about them.”

“Give me what pairs you have ready,” said I eagerly, and paid him thrice (three times) the amount he modestly asked. Hurriedly, I returned to my friend and proffered (offered) them to him, saying, “Here my friend, some of these pairs will surely fit you. Take them, put them on, they will save you untold suffering.” But he looked embarrassed: in fact, he was well nigh (overcome) with chagrin.

“Ah, thank you,” said he, politely, “but you don’t understand. It just isn’t being done. The front (prominent) families, well, I . . .”

“Why don’t you?” said I.

“Ah,” said he, smiling with his accustomed ingratiating touch of practical wisdom, “that is just it. Why don’t we?”

In coming out of the “City of Everywhere” into the “Here and Now” over and over again that query (question) rang in my ears: “Why don’t we? Why don’t we? Why don’t we . . .”

Why call ye me ‘Lord, Lord’ and do not the things I command you?^{ix}

Conclusion

The Pastor Nominating Committee has accomplished their goal. They set their hearts and minds on the task, and with a masterful stroke of Providence, they have finished their process. You have elected an extraordinary new pastor and have dismissed the PNC with enormous gratitude for their work. As the Church of Jesus Christ, your future lies before you like *a land of dreams, so various, so beautiful, so new.*^x You are most assuredly a people *growing together in faith, reason, service, and love.* You know what you believe. You say what you believe. Now, with renewed vision and unflagging conviction, may you do what you say. Put on the whole armor of God! Stand for what you believe! Suit your action to the Word, and your word to the action. . . . Why not?

Blessed are you who call Jesus ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do what he commands you!

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

**The Reverend Calvin Coolidge Wilson
Interim Pastor
Bower Hill Community Church
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
27 June 2010**

Notes

-
- ⁱ Written and told by Daniel Berrigan, Jesuit Priest, at Abington Presbyterian Church in the late 1970s.
- ⁱⁱ The Apostles' Creed, first two lines
- ⁱⁱⁱ The Nicene Creed, last lines of second paragraph
- ^{iv} The Confession of '67, last line of section B, The Love of God
- ^v Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II, iii
- ^{vi} Ephesians 6:20
- ^{vii} Ephesians 6:13-17
- ^{viii} Lee Iacocca, *Where Have All the Leaders Gone?* pp. 8-9
- ^{ix} Hugh Price Hughes, *The City of Everywhere*, an allegory. Hughes was a celebrated Congregational minister in England.
- ^x From Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach*