

HEARING BEFORE SEEING

Scriptures: Acts 1:1-8; John 20:24-31

My father had a favorite expression when I was growing up. He said, “Children should be seen and not heard.” He said this because I talked a lot. When I was four years old my family doctor nicknamed me Motor Mouth. I just liked to talk, what can I say? But that is why my father said, “Children should be seen and not heard.”

Sometimes people feel the same way about their faith. They say, “I don’t talk about my faith very much, but I try to show it in the way I live.” Have you ever heard that? I often hear that said about someone at memorial services. “Joe did not talk much about his faith, but he showed it in his actions.” In effect they are saying, “The Christian faith should be seen and not heard.” It is less important to talk about our faith than to show it in the way we live.

I would be the first to agree that our faith should be shown in action. Words without action are empty. Talking the talk without walking the walk is hypocrisy. But that does not mean words are unimportant.

One of my favorite stories is about the Norwegian farmer’s wife who complained to her husband about the lack of romance in their marriage. She said, “You never tell me that you love me.” The farmer replied, “I said I loved you when I married you. If I change my mind I’ll let you know.”

Sometimes actions are not enough. We do not always understand the meaning of a person’s actions unless the person expresses that meaning in words. It is true that words without actions are empty, but actions without words are ambiguous. We don’t always understand what a person is thinking and feeling by their actions. We need them to talk to us. We need them to tell us in words what they are thinking or feeling.

And that brings me to our second scripture lesson. In Acts 1 we are told that Jesus appeared to his disciples for forty days after his resurrection. The disciples are assuming that Jesus will stay with them. They say to Jesus, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” The disciples assume that Jesus is going to show who he is in action. But instead he says, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses.” I think this is crucial for understanding the Holy Spirit in our lives today. The Holy Spirit does not show the kingdom of God; it empowers us to *tell* people about it. The kingdom of God is something that must be heard before it is seen.

This explains what happens at Pentecost. Acts, chapter 2, says, “When the day of Pentecost had come, they (the disciples) were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind.” The first manifestation of the Holy Spirit was the sound of a rushing wind. It was heard before it was seen. This emphasis on hearing continues in verses 3-4:

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. And all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Even when the Holy Spirit was seen, it was seen as a *tongue*. The Holy Spirit manifests itself first and foremost in words, in verbal messages, in languages that people can understand. The Holy Spirit is something that is heard before it is seen.

This is demonstrated in our first scripture lesson. When Jesus first appeared to his disciples after the resurrection, Thomas was absent. We don't know why he was absent; he just missed church that day. When the other disciples saw him, they told him about how Jesus showed up at their Sunday evening church service the previous week. Thomas did not believe them, but there is an interesting little detail in the story. The next week when they had their Sunday evening church service, Thomas was there. He may not have believed the disciples, but when he heard their message he was curious enough at least to come and find out. And that is when he met Jesus. For Thomas, faith had to be heard before it was seen.

The same is true for us. At the end of chapter 20 John says,

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Before you can experience Jesus, you must hear about him. That is why we have the Bible. That is why we have churches. That is why we have preachers and Sunday School teachers and Vacation Bible School leaders. The Christian faith must be heard before it is seen.

It would be nice if it was the other way around. It would be nice if we could show people the love of God in our actions instead of our words. But friends, we are not good enough for that. Our actions are always ambiguous. They are a mixture of good and bad, right and wrong, caring and self-centeredness.

When my son Keith was five years old we had a conversation in the car. Even though this happened 16 years ago, I remember it vividly. It was the kind of conversation a parent never forgets. Besides, I wrote it down because I knew that some day I would use it in a sermon. We were riding down Southeast Boulevard when Keith turned to me and said, "God is bigger than you, isn't he Dad?" "Yes," I said, "God is bigger than me." He was quiet for a minute, then he said, "God's nicer than you, too, isn't he, Dad?" I was starting to wonder where this conversation was going, but I said, "Yes, Keith, God is nicer than me." He was quiet for a minute, then he said, "Jesus is nicer than you, too, uh Dad?" I was wondering how low I would go on the nice category. But I said, "Yes, Jesus is nicer than me." "Yeah," Keith concluded, "Jesus and God are the same nice."

Fortunately Keith heard about the love of God in Jesus even if he didn't always see it in his dad. Friends, that is how it must be for all of our children, for all of our friends, neighbors, and family members. You are not good enough, you are not patient enough, you are not kind

enough or faithful enough or selflessly generous enough to show the love of God in your actions. I'm sorry, but it is true. All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. Even on your best days the love of God is like a dim image in a mirror, twisted and distorted by pride, resentment, lust, greed, prejudice, apathy, or a host of other issues and problems in your life. That's why the Christian faith must be heard before it is seen. God is nicer than you. So is Jesus. So is the Holy Spirit. We must tell our children—that is what it means to be witnesses—we must tell our children, we must tell our neighbors and friends and co-workers about the love of God in Jesus Christ, because only then will they begin to see it working in our imperfect lives and world.

In Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* Levin, one of the main characters, falls in love with a woman named Kitty. He knows how he feels about Kitty, but he is not sure how Kitty feels about him. When she looks at him, he cannot decide if she is looking at him with interest or with bemusement. When she shows attention to other men, he cannot tell if she is attracted to them or just being friendly. When she rides by in a carriage and does not look at him, he cannot decide if she is ignoring him or just does not see him. He drives himself crazy trying to interpret her actions.

But one day they have a conversation. Even the conversation is somewhat cryptic. They are so nervous and self-conscious around each other they can hardly bring themselves to talk about their true feelings. So instead they sit at a table and write messages to each other using only the first letter of each word that they want to say. But finally they figure out what each is saying, and they discover they are in love with each other.

The striking thing is what happens to Levin after that. He begins to see everything else around him differently. He goes to a meeting and the secretary reads the minutes in a halting, awkward fashion. Normally this would have annoyed Levin, but Tolstoy writes, "But Levin saw from the secretary's face what a nice, kind, and splendid fellow he was. That was plain from the nervous and confused way in which he read the minutes" (p. 465). Then there was a debate about some item of business. Levin hated debates, but Tolstoy writes, "What seemed so remarkable to Levin was that he could see through them all today, and from little signs he had never noticed before he got to know the true character of every one of them and saw distinctly that they were all kindhearted people" (p. 466).

Do you see what is happening? Hearing that we are loved changes the way we see things. That is why we have to tell our children about God's love in Jesus Christ. That is why we have to bring them to Sunday School and church and Vacation Bible School. That is why we have to invite our neighbors and friends and co-workers to come and hear the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ. You have to hear this message before you will see it.

My father's favorite express was "Children should be seen and not heard." One of my favorite expressions as a parent is "Do as I say, not as I do." God's love in Jesus Christ is something we must tell about in words, because only then will people be able to see it occasionally and imperfectly in us.

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