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“What the Heck is a Gloria Patri? (The Word)”
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West Side Christian Church

John 1:1-18

Most of the time, actions can speak louder than words. I remember, about a month after becoming responsible for mowing my yard, it had become obvious to me that I needed to invest in some of those other yard maintenance tools: an edger, weed eater, blower, etc. The grass was starting to creep onto my driveway and spill out onto the curb. Weeds were growing in flowerbeds and around trees.

Apparently, the absence of these power tools had been obvious to the rest of the neighborhood as well. One day, as I came back to the front of the house after mowing the backyard, an edger mysteriously appeared in my driveway. No one needed to say why it appeared or explain to me its presence in front of my house. Not a word needed to be uttered. I knew why it was there. So I used it and my neighbor picked it up when I was done. Most of the time, actions can speak louder than words.

I think this is particularly true in today’s culture. With the diversity of ways that technology allows us to communicate, we really don’t have to say much to each other anymore. The spoken word, and the written word for that matter, has lost their power in many ways.

Take text messaging, for example. Now, I would refer to myself as a neophyte or a novice when it comes to text messaging. For those of you who don’t know, text messaging is a method of communication by which individuals can send typed messages to one another via their cell phones. It is sort of like e-mail, just with mobile phones. The difference is that with texting, you are limited in the number of characters that can be used. Therefore, the messages being sent are usually no more than a couple of sentences.

So, when I say that I am a novice, I mean that I can send and receive basic text messages, but it might take me a minute to type out a full sentence. I am happy to use text messaging for quick questions or simple updates, but not for having entire conversations. I have unlimited text messaging on my cell phone plan, but that is more for Marion, as she is more of an expert in texting. And I can understand basic text messaging lingo like “lol” (laugh out loud), but that’s about it.

Call me old school, but I think that using text messaging is one contributor to the reasons for which the spoken and written word have lost some of their authority. Don’t get me wrong, it has its advantages. Text messaging allows cell phone users to quickly and quietly answer questions or give updates to other cell phone users. This is convenient and can come in handy quite often. Many of you have sent me text messages to update someone’s status in the hospital or to inform me that you will not be able to be at a meeting. It is a helpful means of communication.

However, with the onset of text-messaging, e-mail, facebook, and MySpace, we communicate more now with acronyms and sentence fragments. Our attention span is increasingly lessening, as we prefer sound bites to lengthy articles or long speeches. These days, it just seems that actions, more often, speak louder than words.

When I was in school, I remember my grammar and English classes being referred to as language arts. To this day, I still believe language to be an art form. Words are complex and multifaceted. Depending upon how they are crafted and the ways in which they are used, words inspire, words instruct, words foster relationship, words have power, words can change people's lives...particularly when it is God's Word.

I remember one afternoon being at the church by myself when the phone rang. I answered it and it was a pre-school parent calling to inquire about the chapel service we do for the children a couple of times a month. She asked, "Are you the pastor?"

"Yes, Ma'am"

"My son's in your pre-school program and he loves it."

"Well, that's great." I replied.

"We are happy about what he is learning, the friends he is making, and the skills he is developing."

Once again, I said, "Great!"

"However," she said, "I am not sure I like him participating in chapel."

I responded, "Well, we don't try to push anything on them or indoctrinate them. Basically, we usually just remind the kids that God loves them"

She said, "That's the problem. He comes home now thinking he is as good as anyone in Hampton Roads and that no matter what he does, he will still be loved."

And I asked her, "Why is that problem?"

For our faith, there is something valuable about the written and spoken Word. Of course, before the Bible was even written, the spoken word was fundamental to the faith of our ancestors. The Israelites passed on their faith through oral tradition. It was storytelling that bound the people to one another and to God.

Then, as the written word became more popular, the Bible was composed and put together overtime. The written word did not take the place of, but certainly became just as important as, the spoken word. Of course, the Bible is chalked full of a diversity of different genres of writing: history, poetry, letter, and narrative. In fact, we refer to the Bible as "The Word"—the Word of God communicated to God's people.

Additionally, the stories that were handed down through both the oral tradition of the Israelites and the writings we have in our Scripture, describe a God that thinks words are important too. God speaks the world and all things in it, into creation. Throughout the Old Testament, God speaks to God's leaders in order that they might lead God's people.

In our New Testament reading this morning, John describes Jesus Christ as "The Word." The way that God eventually reveals God's self is through "The Word" that is

made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. This Word is with God even at creation and all things come into being through God's Word.

Words are important to God. Words are important to our faith. Words are important to how we live our faith. Sometimes it takes just a few words to live as God would want us to live; words like, "I am sorry," "I forgive you," "I love you," "I am here for you."

And so it is that words, that The Word, remain important in worship. The second part of the worship experience should be a service of Word. Now, this part of our service gets broken up in the current way that we do worship here at West Side. As our worship service currently stands, this part of the service begins with the reading of the Old Testament, moves into the morning prayer, but is interrupted by the offering and Communion, and then is picked back up at the end of the service. I will reflect more on this broken service of Word next week when I reflect on Communion.

Regardless of where it is in worship, the service of Word should include the reading of scripture and the interpreting of that scripture, usually through preaching. This allows for God's Word, God's words, to come alive in our presence—to take up residence in our hearts.

Some of you may be wondering about the picture that is on the front of the bulletin. I chose that picture for this week because in it, God's Word literally reaches out to embrace that woman. That is what happens during the service of the Word.

From the Old Testament reading, to the anthem, to the New Testament reading and the preaching, we listen to God's written and spoken Word in order that we might be touched by God. That Word sometimes challenges us. That Word sometimes confronts us. Often times, that Word teaches us. Sometimes that Word comforts us. Regardless, of how it might take effect on a given Sunday, we are called to be open, during the service of the word, to be touched in some way, by the God we know in Jesus Christ.

As a pastor, I spend the majority of my time in a given week preparing this section of the worship experience. I pray, I study, I think and reflect—and then I write what I believe God is calling me to share with you on that particular Sunday. And I am not naïve enough to believe that the words always reach out to connect to all of you. However, I was reminded of how God's Word, of how God's words work, through a story I read this week from Fred Craddock.

He writes, "I was called back to Oklahoma while in Atlanta. The voice on the phone didn't have to say who she was. She just began by saying, 'Ray died.' He was a friend of mine at a little church where I had served. It had been years and years and years. We were good friends.

'Ray wanted you to come and have his funeral, if you could.' 'I'll come,' I said.

There was the funeral, where I talked to Mary and the others, and all the family was gathered. The little church in that town gave a fellowship dinner following the funeral. We came from the graveyard to the church, and the women of the church had spread a nice meal. We sat around and talked, and as the peripheral people began to drift away, it left only the family.

Kathryn was there. She was the oldest daughter. When I served that church, she was the worst thirteen-year old I had ever seen. I mean, she was noisy, in and out, pushing, shoving, breaking things, never stayed in the room, out of the room, never paid attention. When I left there, I could have said, ‘If there’s one person that doesn’t know a thing I’ve said in the time I was here, it would be Kathryn.’

Kathryn, now an executive with the telephone company, has premature gray sprinkled in her hair. We were sitting at the table, talking, and I said, ‘I’m sorry, it’s such a tough time.’ She and her dad were real close. I said it again.

She said, ‘It is tough. When mother called and said Dad had died of a heart attack, I was just scrambling for something. Then I remembered a sermon you had preached on the meaning of the Lord’s Supper.’

I said, ‘You’re kidding, Kathryn,’ and she told me something I had said in that sermon.”¹

Sometimes *words* speak louder than *actions*—particularly when it is God’s Word.

That’s how God’s Word works. When it is read aloud, when it is written, when it is spoken, it reaches out and embraces us in ways that we may not even understand until some day down the road when we need it most.

Amen.

¹ Craddock, Fred. *Craddock Stories*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001. Pgs. 30-31.