

Sermon, August 15, 2021

It's popular, in some circles, to quote a saying that's attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. It goes like this, "Preach the Gospel at all times and if necessary, use words." That aphorism seems to suggest that we should let our lives preach the Gospel and only resort to words when it's absolutely necessary.

And I know waaaay too many Christians who use this as an excuse to stay silent about Jesus.

First of all, there's no evidence that St. Francis ever actually said that. And second, Francis did a lot of very verbal preaching in his lifetime, so I seriously doubt that he ever really uttered those words.

The fact is, words matter. They don't just convey truth, they release life. Eternal life.

If you read the stuff I sent out for Bible Study this week, you'll know where I'm headed, at least a little bit.

In today's reading the Jews continue to grumble about what Jesus is saying, and He continues to explain that His flesh is bread unlike the bread of this world, and that it leads to an altogether different sort of life, "eternal" life, unlike what has been known before.

And then, a few verses after our reading from today we see this,

"After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." John 6:66–69 (ESV)

First. Notice that it says many of His disciples turned back. John clearly differentiates between "The Twelve" and "the disciples."

Now also notice. These words of Jesus are so hard to “digest” that most of the crowd that’s been following Him leave. A favorite preacher of mine, Bill Johnson, likes to say that John 6 is probably the worst sermon ever preached. Jesus goes from a congregation of hundreds, maybe thousands, back to the Twelve and maybe a few other hangers on.

If we were to measure the quality of a sermon by how many people want to hear it, then yeah, that’s a bad one. Really bad. I mean, at this point, even the Twelve are shaking their heads, wondering what in the world Jesus is talking about. Let’s face it. Simon Peter does NOT say, “No, Jesus, we’re not leaving, we’re not even thinking about it.” Instead he says, “Who would we go away from you to?” (trying to give you a closer sense of the “go” verb from the Greek.) It’s kind of like he says, “Well, yeah, this is hard, but where else are we going to go? We know that you have the words of eternal life, and I guess these are some of them, but what we know for sure is that the words you give us give us eternal life. And because of that, we also believe that you really ARE the Holy One of God.”

Hear that. The Twelve stick with Jesus because He has the words of eternal life. Because of that, and because of the faith that has engendered, they stay in spite of these hard words, these offensive words. These particular words won’t make a lot of sense, even to the Twelve, until the Last Supper, but then they will.

The point here is that Jesus did not just preach the Gospel by His way of life and then use words only when He had to. Not even close.

He spoke, and spoke words of life. The words Jesus spoke RELEASED life into the world. Eternal life. And because they did, others believed in Him.

Do you get the difference here from the normal way we think about evangelism? Usually our pattern is:

Someone preaches the Gospel.

Someone listening believes the words they hear.
That one who listens and believes THEN receives eternal life.

That's NOT what Simon Peter described. This is what he described.

Jesus spoke words of life.
Some of the people who heard these words received that life.
Because of the life they experienced in those words, they believed in Jesus.

Jesus did not tell them what to believe, He just spoke life to them, even as He's doing here, though the power of these words to release life escapes even the Twelve at this point.

That's true evangelism. Speaking life. Telling the world how precious it is in the sight and heart of the Father. Telling individuals how desperately in love with them their Creator is. Teaching them to see themselves as God sees them, beautiful, powerful, worthy.

Yes, we can treat people in a way that makes their value apparent, but if we don't use words, all they'll see is that they're valuable to US. And while that's not a bad thing, it pales beside the reality that they're of infinite value to the Father. You don't have to know every word of the Bible to speak those words to others, you just have to know the Father's heart for you. Because once you know that you'll know His heart for others.

There's a story I love about a man in Africa who, as a boy, was awakened in the middle of the night by an angelic visitation. His name is Sithole Surprise. He was told to flee his village in the middle of the night because members of another village were coming to kill everyone in his village. He got up and left. He took his best friend with him into the jungle, but his parents, the local witch doctors, wouldn't go. Everyone in his village was slaughtered. He and his friend roamed the jungle alone for some time before they came to another village where two Christians took them in. They explained who the angel was and Who had sent him, and told the

boys about Jesus. Sithole was so captured by the message that he set out to tell other villages about Jesus. But the only verse of the Bible he had was John 3:16. They had very, very few written Bibles in that part of the jungle.

And he went around preaching the Gospel and bringing others to Jesus until he met Heidi Baker, I've mentioned her before) and had some proper training. Now he manages much of Heidi's ministry in Mozambique when she's away, preaching to the Western world.

But he didn't know the Bible inside out. He just knew the Father's love, His heart for him, and for others, and he set about to share that, to release into the world the life that he'd been given.

And he used words. Lots of words.

So, yes, live your life in a way that preaches the Gospel, but always, always accompany that life with words, words of life, lots of words of life.