

## **Listen. Learn. Do.**

*A sermon preached at Cold Stream Trout Lodge, Woody Creek, CO, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.*

*14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 18, Yr. B. Round-up Sunday. September 10, 2006. (Texts: James 1:17-27; Mark 7:31-37)*

I want to invite all the children to come up front and be with me for few minutes. —Thanks for coming up. School has started, hasn't it? Are you glad to be back at school? ...Who's glad? ...Is anybody not glad? — No? Wow! *All* of you are glad to be back at school, back at the business of learning. Good for you!

I read something very interesting the other day. It said, “*Until you can repeat what you know, you don't really know it.*” Who can tell me something you've learned since you went back to school? ...Anybody? —No? Well, maybe there are some things you learned last year that you can tell us. Do you have to learn the capital cities of the states? Does anybody know the capital of Nebraska? ...How about Texas? —You don't know those? O.K., how about Colorado? Yes, Denver! Very good. Can anyone say one of the multiplication tables? You know, “two times two is...”? two times three is...”? Great, thanks.

OK, now I'm going to ask a more serious question: *What is the last thing you remember learning at Sunday School or Church?* Can anybody remember anything? ...*No?! Hmmm.* I hope you Sunday School teachers in the congregation this morning are taking note. —Thanks for helping me out, kids. You can all go back and sit with your parents.

“*Unless you can repeat what you know, you don't really know it.*” The old-fashioned approach to education — used a lot in schools when some of us were younger — was a technique called “class recitation.” It was used mostly with elementary aged children. How many of you remember “recitation” from your school days? It applied to things other than the multiplication tables: parts of speech, conjugations of verbs, names of the capital cities of countries, poems, passages from Shakespeare, and even verses from the Bible. I don't think “recitation” is much in favor in the classrooms of America in 2006, but it definitely had its virtues.

There's a connection between hearing and speaking. If we can't hear, we can't talk —like the deaf and mute man we read about in the gospel for today. That's why children who are born deaf or with seriously impaired hearing have difficulty learning to speak. Because they can't hear the sounds of the words their parents are trying to teach them, they can't repeat them. And they also can't hear the sounds they're making themselves. But if they can be made to *hear*, they'll soon be able to speak, too.

When Jesus opened the man's ears, he also “loosened” his tongue, as the Bible puts it. He made it possible for the man to tell his story to anybody willing to listen. Jesus asked the man to keep quiet about what had happened —because he didn't want to be known among the crowds as “just” another healer— but the man couldn't stay silent. He'd been speechless all his life. Now he had a story to tell, and he was going to tell it, no matter what. The story of the healing of the man who was deaf and mute is preserved in the Bible, not merely because it was another miracle performed by the Son of God, but because —for us Christians— *hearing* and *speaking* are essential activities related to our faith.

In his letter to the Romans (10:17) Paul wrote, “*Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*” Or, in the Good News Bible translation, “*Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message comes through the proclamation of Christ.*” This “proclamation of Christ” doesn't just mean sermons — though preaching clearly was something Paul had in mind. It also includes what any of us have to say about our faith. It's essential for people who want to *grow* in faith to be in a position to *hear* other Christians talk about their faith. People who want to learn need opportunities to listen.

Now I want to say a word to the parents of young children who are here this morning: *Please take note. What I just said applies to you!* ...Especially to you. (And since today is National Grandparents' Day, Grandma and Grandpa, let me also say this applies to *us*, too.) St. Peter's and Christ Church have classes on Sunday for children, but the Church can only do so much. *Parents* (and grandparents) are the primary faith-teachers for

our children. They need to hear *us*, know *our* faith stories, and understand what *we* believe. If we parents and grandparents do our job, our children will come to the point of being able to believe for themselves and one day tell their own stories of faith. In the end, our children's faith stories may sound quite different from ours—but if we don't tell them *ours*, they're likely not to have any of their own at all.

Hearing and speaking are vitally connected – just as the gospel points out. If we haven't *heard* the message, we are unlikely to *understand* it, and certainly unlikely to pass it along. So parents in particular (as well as all Christians) need to speak up and speak out: tell your own faith story so that others can hear and grow in faith. But those who hear (whether children or adults) need to be set free to speak, too... to show whether they are "getting it" or not. People who are learning need to be able to *ask questions*. People who believe in Jesus always welcome questions.

When I was talking to the children I said "*Unless you can repeat what you know, you don't really know it.*" That's true, but it doesn't go far enough. I want to add something more: "*Knowledge that doesn't lead to action is useless.*"

The Apostle James said, "*Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*" That's one of the most often quoted verses in the Bible, and rightly so. *Hearing* the word of God is essential for learning. *Speaking* the word of God is essential to demonstrate our understanding. But *doing* the word of God is the most important of all.

If we imagine that we're good Christians because we go to church and listen to the Bible being read and sermons being preached, we're deceiving ourselves. Unless we "*do the word*," unless we implement what we hear, we're just playing games. True religion is marked by consistency between theory and practice. Without the practice, the theory is useless. Hearing that doesn't lead to *doing* is worthless. Being a follower of Jesus isn't just about having information, it's about having a *way of life*. Jesus wants us to be *people of action*.

Preaching is important. Fr. Roy and I spend hours every week on our sermons. We want to put the Gospel into words you'll hear, understand, and remember. But we don't preach every week merely to provide you with a little bit of intellectual stimulation or something to discuss while you're on the way home in the car. And we don't preach to encourage philosophical argument or debate either, though that can sometimes be fun.

Preaching, or the kind of proclamation of the Gospel that happens when you tell your story of faith, is always a call to action. Jesus wants to open our ears, loosen our tongues, and get us moving, get us busy, *living* the Gospel—not just listening to it and talking about it. Knowledge that doesn't lead to action is useless. What we *profess* is nowhere near as important as what we're able to *perform*.

That means it's important for you parents (and us grandparents) to back up our own words of faith with *lives* that demonstrate that faith. None of us wants to be in the position of saying to a child or anyone else who's looking to us for guidance, "Do what I say, not what I do."

I ran into this little poem the other day. It's not great art, but it's the truth:

*The Gospel is written a chapter a day  
By deeds that you do and by words that you say.  
Men read what you say, whether faithless or true.  
Say, what is the Gospel according to you?*