

Listen, Understand, and Act

*A sermon preached at Christ Church in Sheridan, MT, by the Rev. Bruce McNab
15th Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 18, Year B. Text: Mark 7:24-37.*

I'm interested in how people learn, and I ran into something about education recently that's quite simple, but very profound: *"Until you can repeat what you know, you don't really know it."* And "repeat" doesn't just mean repeating words, it also includes repeating deeds. Somebody else can show you how to make a pie crust, but until you have made one yourself, you don't really know how to do it.

School started recently around here, didn't it? Is there a young person in church who can tell me something you've learned in the last couple of weeks since you went back to school? [*Give an opportunity for kids to talk.*] Or if you haven't learned anything new yet this year, maybe there's something you learned last year you can tell me. [*Give an opportunity for kids to talk.*]

OK, now I'm going to ask a more serious question, and this is one not just for the kids but for us old folks too. What's the last thing you remember learning *at Church*?

"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 2012, 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 parents here who still have your children at home. I know there are at least a few of you here! *Please take note. What I just said applies to YOU!* ...ESPECIALLY to you. The Church can only do so much. *Parents* and grandparents, too — I know there are quite a few of us grandparents here — 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, the children we love will come to the point of being able to believe for themselves and one day will 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 *our* stories, 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're not likely to *understand* it, and certainly not likely 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 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're "getting it" or not. People who are learning need to be able to *ask questions*. And we who put our trust in Jesus always welcome questions.

Earlier 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 Letter of James says, "*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 fooling 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 is not just about having information, it's about having a way of life. Jesus wants us to be people of action.

Preaching is important. Those of us who are preachers spend a lot of time on our sermons. We want to put the Gospel into words people can hear, understand, and remember. But we don't preach just to give you folks in the pews a little intellectual stimulus or something to talk about on your way home in the car. Preaching, as well as the 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 perform.**

That means it's important for parents and grandparents to back up our *words* of faith with *lives* that demonstrate that faith. I don't think we want to be in the position of saying to a child (or another adult, for that matter), "Do what I say, *not* what I do."

I found this little poem online the other day. It's pretty corny, I guess, but it's sure the truth:

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