

Embodying Our Words

John 2:19

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Ever since the day Jesus put Peter on the spot, asking him, “Who do you say that I am,” ever since the author of the Letter to the Hebrews proclaimed, “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many ways by prophets, but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son,” ever since John composed the prologue to his gospel, saying “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory,” Christians have been trying to understand Jesus’ significance. According to the gospels, everywhere Jesus went, people watched him, listened to him, and talked about him.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus shows that he is the authentic revealer of God’s word through the signs he performs. Witnessing these signs, people end up following Jesus. Jesus is aware, however, that different people follow him for different reasons and for different lengths of time and with different levels of commitment. While he often attracts a crowd, Jesus knows that not everyone in the crowd will stick by him to the end. How patient Jesus must have been to witness the waxing and waning of peoples’ affection for him, the flip-flopping of their loyalty to him. How discerning of their many motivations. According to the gospels, from time to time, Jesus would even ask his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” as though to keep his finger on the pulse of the public.

We know from the gospels that some people followed Jesus because they thought he was a prophet. After all, sometimes Jesus spoke like a prophet and acted like a prophet. In the passage we read today, Jesus’ actions place him squarely in the great tradition of the Hebrew prophets. When Jesus takes the whip and chases out the money changers from the temple, he reminds even his disciples of something the prophet Zechariah had said. To be sure, Jesus’ actions here stand in a long line of prophets who protested against debasing the worship of the Lord by substituting ritual for devotion.

Our understanding of Jesus would be impoverished, however, if, by way of this story, we, along with those bystanders who saw Jesus clean out the temple, were so swept up by his prophetic act that we missed the real point of the story. If we listen carefully here to what Jesus says, we can discover the reason that, if it were up to Jesus, people would follow him. The point of the story was not simply to criticize those temple practices that were debasing the worship of the Lord. The story’s point is to move beyond the temple as the place where God dwells to the person of Jesus. When those who had come to the Temple to worship God asked Jesus by what authority he was making this scene, Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

As John tells us, it is clear that people didn’t grasp what Jesus meant. It wasn’t until after Jesus died and was raised from the dead that they remembered what he had said and then understood its meaning. Only then did they understand that Jesus had been speaking about himself. Jesus was the temple.

There are some things about Jesus that we cannot understand, the meaning of which we cannot fully comprehend, except through the lens of Jesus’ incarnation, death and resurrection. Without this lens, it would be easy to consider Jesus to be a prophet, a person through whom God spoke. To understand Jesus simply as a prophet, however, would be such a loss, because Jesus is much more than what he speaks. He is much more than what he says.

This is a big issue for how we understand the significance of Jesus. While the gospel writers tried their best to capture every word they and others could remember Jesus spoke, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Jesus became significant not for speaking God’s word, but for embodying God’s word. In him “the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

What are the implications of this? In her book *Short Stories by Jesus*, biblical scholar Amy Jill Levine makes reference to an old saying - a piece of wisdom, really - that circulates among biblical scholars and that she learned from another New Testament scholar, Ben Witherington, III. It goes like this: "A text without context is just a pretext for making it say anything it wants" (*Short Stories by Jesus*, 8). A text has a context. Words have a context. Words are situated in a specific time and place and within a specific relationship. Words have an audience to whom they are spoken, an audience whose hearing is anticipated, an audience with certain concerns. As any good scholar knows, as any journalist should know, plucking and using words out of context is irresponsible and opens the door to manipulation. And yet, people do it all the time. We use the words of others for whatever point we want to make. And it is wrong. We need to speak for ourselves and to let others speak for themselves.

Can you imagine how often this has happened with the word of God, with the words that the prophets have spoken, with the words that Jesus is recorded to have said? We treat their words as if they had no context or were disembodied. Sometimes we justify ourselves in doing this by saying that God's word is universal. Friends, God's word is universal, but that's not because God speaks the exact same words to every person yesterday, today, and tomorrow. God's word is universal, I think, because God created us with the capacity to be empathetic, to put ourselves in the specific shoes of others who may have lived in an entirely different time in history and place in the world.

We are made of flesh and blood, with a myriad of senses - certainly many more than the five we typically name --, and our senses are so engaged in how we experience the world that it is as though our bodies remember what we have been through. While we know that our conscious mind remembers the details of events, psychologists talk about how our bodies also store and remember things. Some go so far as to say that what our minds forget, our bodies remember. Surely, there must be a psychosomatic way by which we learn about and relate to the world. Surely, the sensitive nature of our embodied existence enables us to be more compassionate with, more empathic toward, others.

Jesus of Nazareth is more than the prophetic words he spoke. He is the person who touched those who were unclean, who ate with those whom everyone else cast out, who knelt and washed the feet of his disciples, who felt such compassion for people that he healed them even on the Sabbath and taught them even though they were women, who rejoiced at a wedding at Cana, who wept for his friend Lazarus, who hungered and thirsted in the desert, who allowed himself to be betrayed and abandoned by disciples, who silently suffered and was put to death by nails and wood. The full humanity of Jesus is expressed in all this specificity - the specificity of his flesh and blood, his life, his relationships, whom he loved, with whom he spoke, what he encountered, what he felt, and what he suffered. All these are the details that, more than words alone, can be felt by us. In Christ, God's word has come to us fully embodied so that when Christians from the earliest days of the church say, "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life," their witness continues to be felt by us (1 John 1:1).

Friends, there are too many disembodied words being flung around today. We are guilty of being irresponsible in our speaking. We use other people's words to make our points, when we should let each person speak for herself, for himself, out of her experience, from his heart. If our words could become more embodied, more grounded in our own life experience, perhaps then, we might soften the suspicions with which people hear what we say. Perhaps then we could slow down the pace by which the things we care deeply about get politicized. Friends, I have no doubt that we are a passionate people. If we are to grow in compassion, however, we must learn to speak for ourselves, embodying the words we speak. Then maybe, something in what you say will touch me and something in what I say will touch you. It starts this way, and grows this way and might even become universal this way.