

The Gospel readings for the next several weeks are drawn from the twenty first and twenty second chapter of Matthew, describing Jesus' split with the chief priests and the scribes and the elders -- and in most of these lessons there are two levels of action going on.

On one level, it's kind of like "TV wrestling" Everyone's playing to the crowd..

"The chief priests and elders throw out a cunning challenge to Jesus authority to teach, and Jesus sidesteps the attack and lands a one-two, question-dilemma combination that leaves them stunned and unable to answer. Then while they're staggering, he backs them against the ropes with a parable and slams them with an insult to their social standing.

And the crowd goes wild... "

But let's not lose sight of the fact that this is simply a continuation of Jesus' teaching about the difference between mere appearance and substance – between mere credentials and authority -- between talk and action.

You see, the point is, it's not so much about John's credentials as it is about the authenticity of his message and how John's message has been accepted by the people. That's what stopped the Pharisees in their tracks.

It's not so much about authority, as it is about the blind being given sight -- the lame walking - - people being set free of the things that imprison them and being given the good news of God's nearness to one and all.

Or from the Parable: It's not so much what you say... *(God knows we say lots around here...)* It's not even so much what you believe... *(God knows the range of belief around here is very diverse.)* What matters is what happens: Who are you?? What do you do?? What are your relationships like?? Does your behavior indicate you are committed to a way of life that stresses love and service and generosity??

You know, some of the most significant words in the Bible are about commitment -- "As for me and my house, I will serve the Lord" promised Joshua. "Here am I, Send me!," said Isaiah. "I will follow you wherever you go," said the enthusiastic young man in Luke. "I will lay down my life for you", said Peter, in John's 13th Chapter...

But we can infer from the parable today that words alone don't count for much. As a matter of fact, words we don't act upon become meaningless, and then they become jokes --- You know, like "The check's in the mail." – or like -- "I'm from the government, I'm here to help."

Talk is cheap.

Nothing can be substituted for our church actually **being** a community of people who embody God's word -- where we can talk about God without apology, because our life together does not mock our words. That's the important thing: Moving forward in all humility to the goal of being more honest, more loving and more generous than we were in the past. That's the kind of life and the kind of example that Paul writes about in the Letter to the Philippians, today.

But sometimes we falter. Sometimes we don't live up to the commitments we've made. And we're certainly not alone, when we falter. The enthusiastic young man I mentioned in Luke, walked away, after Jesus explained to him what a commitment like that meant... And Peter -- well, we know that Peter had his own struggles with living up to commitment.

But struggle, he did. And with God's help, he was able to live up to and into the commitment he made, and in so doing, became the rock upon which Jesus founded his church...

Perhaps that's the message for you and me in this lesson today.

Sometimes like the guys in the parable, we don't always do what we say. It's not like we set out do that or to be that way, I think it's that sometimes we repeat the words so many times, that we don't hear them. Or we get in a rut. Or other things get in the way between the time we say them and the time to act them out... Or we don't think. Or life's not as simple as it used to be... Or any number of things...

But the good news is that's not the end of it. Regardless of how many times we say something and then don't follow through with it -- regardless of how many times we commit and then can't fulfill, God continues to reach out to us. He continues to draw us into his loving service.

He continues to restore us and encourage us to try again when we fall short. And like Peter, and like countless others who have gone before us, eventually, our actions match our words -- as God works through us.

In Jesus name,

Amen