

## **“In praise of service – and words”**

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There is a popular quote that surfaces from time to time that people frequently use in support of Christian social ministry. Although the source is unverified, it's often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.”

Usually, when this statement is lifted up, it's in defense of doing without saying. In other words, there is an underlying desire to be involved in doing good things without the need to be saying anything. Service and goodness are their own witness to the gospel. People taking this tact are often quite serious about this view, even to the point of having their blood pressure raise visibly if someone says something about the church needing to speak.

So, is service its own witness to the gospel?

Of course, for the gospel message to be taken seriously, there must be a sense that whoever shares the message is trustworthy. Lying, conniving, self-centered messengers will hardly be given a good audience about the gracious and life-changing God whom we encounter in Jesus Christ. After all, if lying, conniving and self-centeredness are the fruits of the gospel, who needs Jesus to help with that? Most of us can manage those things on our own and have already dealt with too many people who seem to be outright experts at them!

But the flip side is a bit sinister. If honesty, integrity and service are sufficient witness to the gospel, then for them to be noticed also implies that Christians have a corner on them. Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, agnostics and atheists must all be somehow dishonest, cunning and self-absorbed. People will simply see that I am better than my neighbor, and that will be witness enough. This is, of course, false, both in the truth of the matter as well as the message it communicates about the gospel. We are at the same time “saint and sinner.” It is not our goodness that we witness to. It is the gracious goodness of the God we meet in Jesus, in spite of our lack of goodness.

The current tagline for the ELCA is, “God’s work. Our hands.” On the one hand, it is absolutely true. United with Christ in baptism, our hands are invited to continue the work of Jesus. Our lives are joined as the church to being incarnational extensions of Jesus. Teresa of Avila famously said, “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours.” Good stuff!

But let's be clear. Service may be part of witness but service is NOT witness without words. Atheists see a person do something helpful for others and they interpret it through their lens: People can be good and help others out of their own goodness. Help someone apart from them knowing the faith by which you do it: They will believe they are fortunate to have you as a neighbor. Witness without words is a witness to ourselves and not a witness to the crucified and risen Christ. As nice as it would be to “use words when necessary,” in today's world, they are almost always necessary.

A better mindset for us would be, “God’s work. Our hands. God’s word. Our voice.” It isn't that we should stop using our hands. Rather, we need to start including our voice as well.

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