

*All the good words, and all the good wishes,
Never replace help with the dishes.*

Those words decorated a plate that hung in the kitchen of my mother-in-law Helen. Judy graciously does not quote them to me when, having been asked to help with some chore around the house, I answer in the affirmative. And then, come next morning, she returns to the scene of the ask – and there is the still-full garbage container waiting to be emptied, or whatever had been the object of my dereliction. Words alone don't cut it.

Words alone don't cut it in Jesus' parable, either. In that ancient story or in its contemporary re-enactments: words can point in the right direction. Words can declare well-meaning intentions. But even the best of our words risk irrelevance or worse if they are not linked to follow-through.

We see that in the parable. One child speaks wrongly, but then acts rightly. The other child knows what to say, but leaves it at that. Matthew does not psychologize as to why. Was the "no but yes" kid later stricken with guilt, or just figured out the best way to keep peace in the family? Was the "yes but no" kid a smooth talker and no-doer, or just absent-minded? Those kinds of details are not of Jesus' concern, at least as Matthew tells it. "Which one of the two did the parent's will?" In the parable, it is clear that Helen and Jesus agree: words alone don't cut it.

Now, don't misunderstand. Words are important. Creation issued from the spoken word of God. Redemption is perceived in John's gospel as the *Word made flesh*. Yet even there, Word didn't stay Word. Word became incarnate, enacted in Jesus. That is a worthy reminder: words still need incarnation. Worship can become a show of words if it remains unengaged in the world outside sanctuaries. Talking about Jesus is fine and well, but words about Jesus fall flat if others find it hard to hear those words through the un-Jesus dissonance of our actions – or the lack thereof.

But the parable offers hope. Remember the child who says no? The parable does not slam the door shut. Even when we get the words wrong – and the best of us will, and do – grace still leaves room to get the action right. To turn our no into a yes . . . in word and in deed.

For Reflection and Action:

When have you seen this story played out in your life; what enabled "yes" to come?

If you could ask one question of one of the parable's characters:

Who and what would you ask; why?

Where might this parable need to land in the life of the Church today; why?