

“SO YOU’D RATHER SEE A GOOD SERMON THAN HEAR ONE”

Acts 9:36-43

A Sermon by John Thomason

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May 12, 2019

Across several decades of preaching, I’ve heard one particular comment many times from parishioners: “I’d rather see a good sermon than hear one” – or at least something to that effect. You might think such a statement would be hurtful to me since a big part of my vocation is to craft and deliver sermons; but believe it or not, I don’t take it personally or feel offended. When people say, “I’d rather see a good sermon than hear one,” I get it.

Sometimes people are saying that they are primarily visual learners, that they best absorb truth by seeing it – on a computer monitor or a movie screen, for example – rather than hearing it through the spoken word. Or, they may be simply acknowledging that it’s hard to really hear sermons – to sit through a 20-minute monologue and give the preacher one’s undivided attention. I understand this difficulty myself, because I not only preach sermons, I also hear other people preach at conferences and denominational meetings. It’s not easy for me to hear sermons – to block out the distractions around me and the noises inside my own head, or to curb my tendency to critique sermons rather than listen for the truth they have to teach me. I, too, can become restless, inattentive, or impatient when I hear sermons, and I wouldn’t be surprised or disturbed if you do, too.

One of the pulpit masters of my lifetime, Fred Craddock, wrote about a prominent Texas preacher (not me!) who often complained that he was not heard by his congregation – not even, he said, during the announcements. According to him, announcements of church functions were published in the weekly parish paper, reprinted in the weekly worship bulletin, and again repeated orally by the pastor during the informal moments of Sunday worship. Plus, he told Craddock, “During the benediction I pray, ‘Please help the people to remember the fellowship supper on Wednesday at 6:30.’ But invariably, at the door following worship someone will ask me, ‘Are we going to have the fellowship dinner?’ Do I delude myself that someone hears my sermons? Not at all.”

Frankly, this preacher sounded a bit burned out and cynical to me. I have a lot more confidence in our congregation’s listening skills than he had in his. But he did have a grasp of how challenging it is for many of us to hear sermons and retain what we hear. When people say, “I’d rather see a good sermon than hear one,” they may simply be admitting that listening to a sermon is not easy listening.

But more often, when people say, “I’d rather see a good sermon than hear one,” they’re really saying something else. They’re saying something akin to our old maxim, “Actions speak louder than words.” In the beloved musical *My Fair Lady*, an uncouth Cockney flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, spends her days and nights under the tutelage of a linguistics professor who tries to coach her to pronounce words properly. After her transformation is complete, she is courted by a young man named Freddie who professes love for Eliza in a song that is both eloquent and passionate. Eliza responds with a song of her own – a song of protest: “Words! Words!

Words! I'm so sick of words! I get words all day through; first from him, now from you! Is that all you blighters can do? Don't talk of stars burning above; if you're in love, show me!"

Eliza gives voice to the way some people perceive those who profess love for God, whether from the pulpit or the pew. All they hear is words, words, and more words; and the words are not convincing because they are not reinforced by actions. Some of the key figures in the Bible warn against this tendency. The apostle James says to his readers, "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only" (James 1:22), and "faith without works is dead" (2:17). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "By their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:20), suggesting that it's not what we profess with our lips that counts, it's what we produce in our lives. One can easily imagine God saying to each of us: "If you're in love, show me!"

Today, if you are among those who would rather see a good sermon than hear one, I have just the sermon for you. In the 9th chapter of Acts, we see Peter exercising the prophetic power of healing. He restores to life a celebrated woman from the town of Joppa who has just died. As we read this story, we are reminded of two Old Testament prophets, Elijah and Elisha, whom God empowers to raise persons from the dead. Above all, we are reminded of the prophetic ministry of Jesus, who restores to life at least three individuals – a widow's son, Jairus' daughter, and his own friend Lazarus. Throughout the Book of Acts, Luke is telling us that Jesus' prophetic ministry does not end when he leaves the earth; it continues through the ministry of his apostles. They preach and heal by the power of the risen Christ. So it's no surprise that Acts is full of sermons – lengthy, impassioned sermons preached by the likes of Stephen, Paul, and Peter himself.

But notice that in today's story from Acts 9, Peter doesn't preach a sermon at all. He bears witness to the power of the Easter faith solely through an action, by raising a woman from the dead. We don't hear a sermon, we see it. What's more, this silent but visible sermon has a dramatic effect. Luke tells us that many people come to faith – again, not on the basis of what Peter says, but on the basis of what he does.

Notice that the same can be said of the person Peter heals, a woman known by the Aramaic name Tabitha and by the Greek name Dorcas. Luke doesn't tell us much about her. We know nothing about her family, or whether she is a mother, although she seems like a fitting subject for us to consider here on Mother's Day. Her resume' simply states that she is a seamstress and a disciple of Jesus. When she dies, there is a great outpouring of grief in the church at Joppa, where she has been a faithful member. Because she is a woman in a patriarchal society, it's unlikely that she is a high-ranking leader in the church, and there is certainly no mention of her being a preacher. But still, Dorcas is remembered as a powerful witness to the risen Christ. She is honored by the church not for what she says, but for what she does. Specifically, Luke tells us that "she was devoted to good works and acts of charity" (Acts 9:36). And this is why she is so deeply mourned by her faith community. Her life has been focused on service to others, and her death leaves an enormous gap. When church members like Dorcas die, there is always the chance that the good work they have done will cease. Their death really makes a difference, because their life makes such a difference. With Dorcas, we don't hear a good sermon, we see one, and her deeds have a powerful impact.

Over the years, I've known a lot of faithful disciples who fit the profile of Dorcas, and many of them have been female like she was. They are devoted to the service of others, to what

Luke calls “good works and acts of charity.” They call no attention to themselves, but their efforts do not go unrecognized. Simply by what they do, they are powerful witnesses to the Easter faith.

Today, I’d like to pay tribute to one such person in particular. This is Mother’s Day. Beverly Thomason is my mother; as her son I have bragging rights; and as the old saying goes, “it ain’t braggin’ if it’s true.” However, my intention is not really to brag about my mom, but to share with you some things about her that you may not know.

Mother was raised in the small West Texas town of Breckenridge, population 6,000. The environment she grew up in was not only tradition-bound and provincial; in many ways it was also difficult and challenging. But she was determined to make something substantial of her life. She went off to college at age 16, earned a Bachelor’s in Business Administration from Baylor University, and was accepted into the graduate school of business at Columbia University in New York. She had the intellect and leadership skills to become a success in the world of commerce; but as things turned out, she made her life noteworthy in other ways and places. During her senior year at Baylor she met and became engaged to the man who would become my father, Johnny Thomason. So instead of earning an MBA degree, she got what she called the “MRS” degree! This was back in the “Ozzie and Harriet” era in American society, and Mother, like nearly all of her peers, became a full-time homemaker. She gave birth to three boys by the time she was 26 years old. Her life at home was all about “good works and acts of charity” – constantly giving of herself to her husband and children. She was a helpmate, lover, nurse, tutor, cheerleader, counselor, and chef, all rolled into one.

But if Mother’s charity began at home, it didn’t end there. She was an active volunteer in the community and a stalwart worker in the church. For 71 years, Mother has been a member of a Baptist congregation that has never elected a female deacon nor had an ordained female minister. As much as I love my home church, I believe it has denied women the voice in church matters that they deserve by birthright. To her great credit, Mother managed to find her own voice – for example, as a member of several pastoral search committees and as a Sunday School teacher.

However, like Dorcas, her most powerful “sermons” were acts to be seen rather than heard. On several occasions, she served as a volunteer on mission trips. One took her to Queens, New York, the others to a border town in Mexico. In both settings, her job was to prepare meals for those who were out on the front lines of ministry. She would get up before dawn to prepare breakfast for the other volunteers. When all the dishes from that meal were washed and put away, it was time to start preparing lunch. When the lunch process was completed, she started preparing dinner, and that job wasn’t finished until bedtime. Each day was a non-stop labor of love, from early morning to late at night. It was exhausting work, all of it behind the scenes, all grit and no glory. And yet, Mother’s “good works and acts of charity” were a powerful witness to others on her mission team and, by extension, to the people they were serving.

Mother is no longer physically able to go on mission trips and work long hours, but as many of you know, she remains the same compassionate and generous person she always has been. She is still a caregiver and benefactor to her sons, granddaughters, great-grandson, and her many friends.

OK, perhaps I've wound up bragging about my mother after all! But you have permission to brag about your mothers, too, and to honor other people you know who follow the pattern of Dorcas. They may not say a lot, but they do a lot, and what they do has an impact not only within the church, but in the community around them. Outsiders can discern the Lord's presence through acts of mercy as well as through acts of speech, perhaps even more so.

So you'd rather see a good sermon than hear one? Well, look around you. Good sermons can be seen all over this sanctuary. Thank you, thank you, thank you for your faithful witness.