

Arguably, the most famous monk in history is Saint Francis of Assisi. Francis once said, “Always preach the Gospel. If necessary, use words.” His point was that one is far more effective in proclaiming Jesus Christ by acting as Christ to your neighbor than in simply talking about Jesus. Martin Luther, the German reformer, said the same thing.

There is a story about St. Francis and several of his fellow monks that is valuable and worth telling. One day, they set out from their monastery to proclaim Christ in a neighboring village. This was what the church sometimes calls a “preaching mission.” As the story goes, when they got there Francis saw the villagers doing their various chores, so he and his monks decided to join in, working side by side with the locals, engaging them in conversation, listening to their concerns and their problems, sharing stories, involving themselves in the life of the village - in short, being good neighbors. As the sun set, Francis and his friends left the village. On the way back, one of the newer monks said, “I thought that we were going there to preach the Gospel.” Francis responded, “If these people have not heard the Gospel today, then reading from the Bible will not make any difference to them!” And so they went on their way.

The point is that the Gospel lived is the Gospel alive. Otherwise, it is just ink on paper. The author of the epistle attributed to Saint James tells us the same thing. He wrote, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.”

You can put this somewhat redundant and stiff prose into easier to understand American vernacular. “You got to walk the walk, not just talk the talk.” The Epistle of Saint James is often criticized as suggesting a work-related understanding of salvation. We teach that good works do not get us to heaven. God’s grace, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ gives us our salvation. Luther said that good works never saved anybody, and salvation is through the grace of Jesus Christ, alone. But that said, the reality is that works reflect faith. Works bear witness to faith. Where there are no works, faith, if it ever existed, has grown dim. This is not to say that good works earn us our salvation, or even play a part. I cannot say that enough. There is no *quid pro quo* required for God’s gift of his son, Jesus Christ. Rather, good works done for others, in response to our Lord’s commandment that we love others as we love ourselves, simply reflect our faith and mirror our wish to live as icons of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel this morning tells us that Jesus didn’t just talk the talk. Wherever he went, Jesus reached out to help those in need. He sought anyone in distress, but it is interesting that the deeds that the Gospels recount almost always focus on his love for those largely on the outside of society looking in. Deaf people, people with speech impediments,

people with leprosy were often shunned socially because society blamed their illnesses on sin. Society is rarely compassionate, then or now. I suppose that it has something to do with a strange social paranoia that somehow association with the afflicted could result in our own contamination. But these “contaminated” people, if you will, were the very people Jesus sought. So it also was with St. Francis. So it should also be with us. To be Christian is to love all in the name of Christ. To be Christian is to reach out and live out the Gospel. To be Christian is, like St. Francis, to be a model of God’s perfect and inclusive love for his world. *Amen.*