

St. Francis of Assisi famously instructed, “Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.” The dictum possesses a delicious double entendre. Clearly, Francis counsels that we need to rethink what it is to preach the gospel. Words and actions are not divorced. Both are necessary. However, when it comes to preaching, actions really do speak louder than words. The gospel finds expression--lives, breathes, and has its being--in what we *do* as much, if not more, as in what we say. Francis rocks.

The other directive seems to be advice regarding the word that we speak. Francis’ guidance not only gives weight to action, it also implies an apprehension with the spoken word. If one is to err, err on the side of saying less. If necessary, use words. Seemingly sage advice. It does, however run counter to the words of St. Paul in Romans 10:

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed?  
and how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard? and  
how shall they hear without a preacher?

Not so surprisingly, Paul invests greatly in the spoken word, because belief, for Paul, comes through hearing the story of Jesus. Certainly, words are important.

However, I know a few colleagues who could follow St. Francis’ advice regarding verbiage. And I suspect that there are those who think that I could benefit from hewing closer to the Franciscan dictum as well. The difficulty, in part, with speaking all the time and doing less and less is that our words become untethered to reality. The old adage, “Do as I say, not as I do,” is given space to come home and roost. And I know that we can all think of examples that prove the point.

As I write, the radio plays in the background. The report about clergy sexual abuse against nuns and women and the Vatican’s response reminds me of how far we can fall, and how heinous and harmful such activity is. While such corruption betrays a larger systemic ill, it also starts with human action or inaction. And while the through-the-looking-glass weirdness of such actions would not be stemmed solely by an adherence to St. Francis’ counsel, it certainly may have altered some situations. Thinking before acting. Acting by what approximates the gospel. And silencing the echo chamber of words that sound pious but have no real place or meaning in reality.

Such egregious examples as the scandal in the Roman Catholic Church leave many rightly angered toward, depressed by, and suspicious of the Church. It is in these moments that we look to the likes of St. Francis to remember not only his wisdom but his purpose in the first place. He was reforming a church that in his day had lost its way. *Semper reformandum* is a classic phrase

from the Reformation which means always reforming. We never fully arrive. Thus, we need to continue to reflect on how our words and actions more closely approximate the gospel. Amidst the negativity that can prevail with the news cycle, there is also hope. I see it in the actions of so many in this community. Selfless, loving, justice-oriented, kind, compassionate, and grace-filled actions that take place countless times a day, are often never even seen, and do not clamor for any attention. These actions are done because they are right and good. And they embody what St. Francis taught, “Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.” Amen. Keep preaching people! The world needs it.