

Listening for the Promise

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19) – September 15, 2024

*“I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy.
Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.”*

–Psalm 116:1-2–

The Power of Words

I could hear him coming even before the kitchen door banged open. “Mom!” my son, a middle schooler, yelled from about 4 feet away. “I’m right here,” I replied. “Listen to this! Colin told me that Jesus said, ‘Talk is cheap.’ Is that true?” I don’t remember what I said to settle that adolescent theological debate 25 years ago. I know what I would say today. As far as I know, Jesus didn’t say “talk is cheap.” In fact, what Jesus said and did communicated just the opposite: Words matter.

Mark 9:14-29 tells a story of wasted words and powerful prayers. As the incident begins, the air is filled with the sound of words accomplishing nothing, a fruitless argument between Jesus’ disciples and the scribes, apparently over a father’s request and the disciples’ failure to answer it.

Nothing is resolved until Jesus arrives and stops the argument by listening. Initially he hears only emptiness: “If you can do anything,” doubts the father. Jesus echoes, “If you can,” and then speaks God’s word of promise and power. The Spirit in Jesus’ words calls forth from the agonized father not simply a repeated petition, but a prayer of faith. In response, Jesus demonstrates the power of his word by exorcising the unclean spirit from the man’s son.

What have we learned from this exchange? That words can be empty or full of faith; that faith cries out to God; that God hears and answers the prayer of faith. Words have power. But the lesson has not ended. Even though Jesus has heard the father’s prayer and delivered the son, most of the surrounding crowd continues to speak without faith: To their eyes, the boy is not healed; “he is dead.” So Jesus demonstrates the effectiveness of his word by his action. He raises the boy up.

With the disciples, we are in Jesus’ classroom. Where did we go wrong, they ask; “Why could we not cast it out?” Jesus doesn’t explicitly connect the dots, but we can, “You went wrong by wasting your words in argument when you should have spent them in prayer.”

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