

Wordless Thanks

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

When I first started in ministry, I went through a life crisis as I began ministry, at the wise old age of 25. I remember desperately trying to contain my problem, not daring to share it with anyone as I was so new there. One day, though, I began to share my burden with leaders of the congregation.

One snowy evening, I received a strange phone call. "Dave, can you come on down the street to the church, we have a problem." As I arrived at the church, cars were parked down the street, lights were on all around the church. As I entered, almost the entire congregation were sitting at tables around the fellowship hall – the smell of home cooked dishes and love filled the warmth of that room. People cried out, "Surprise!"

They lavished me with love that evening. It was a generous house-warming potluck attended by virtually the entire combined membership of the three congregations I had been serving for my first 6 months of vocational ministry. Their love and generosity overwhelmed me that night.

"Preach the gospel; when necessary use words" is a quote derived from a prayer by Saint Francis of Assisi¹, reminding us that the most effective preaching is done by example - actions speak for themselves.

What does it mean to preach without words? Some of you may have expertise in American Sign Language; for example, here is how you say "Thank you." (*The sign for "Thank you" is like blowing a kiss, flat hand directed out to the person you are speaking to, and with a smile.*)

Signs are also words, just unvoiced. Consider a time in your life when a gesture you experienced, or witnessed, or offered went beyond words. When an action spoke louder than any words could say. Maybe you offered someone nothing more than the "bread" of your presence, or an anointing through your undivided attention.

In silence, I invite you to think back to that time. As you do, let us recall the gift of Mary to Jesus. Jesus will soon be tried and crucified. Martha looking after the hospitality, preparing food. Lazarus, Jesus, and Judas Iscariot sitting around the table. Mary, wordless, fills the room with fragrance of extravagant love. The silence must have been so full.

Would I have felt a wee bit uncomfortable in the midst of that intimate, meaningful, moment?

A quiet but powerful gesture – no words. Silence speaks when words are not enough. Of course, human instinct is to make sense of it; to force explanations onto a moment of wonder. We yearn to make sense of the mystery.

¹ Jamie Arpin-Ricci, Huffington Post Aug. 31, 2012 https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jamie-arpinricci/preach-the-gospel-at-all-times-st-francis_b_1627781.html.

So, why would Mary have lavished Jesus this way? Jesus not long ago raised her brother Lazarus from the dead; was her anointing of Jesus a gesture of gratitude? But that perfume would have cost a year's pay!

For Judas, extravagance is not in his vocabulary. This act was irresponsible, a waste – she just wasted money that could have sustained people suffering. Love, of course, cannot be reported meaningfully on a balance sheet. God just calls us to embrace the mystery in silence.

Truth be told, for most mainstream churches today, our financial reports have been telling us that our churches cost a great deal, some might say too much to maintain. In these pandemic times, we worry.

Consider, for a moment, the other Bible passage today: God giving the specifications through Moses for the construction of the tabernacle, a mobile home for worshipping God. No expense is spared, no sensory experience left out: lit by lamps, perfumed with incense. The tent and ark with its poles, clasps, and pillars, the curtain at the entrance, and the table with the bread of Presence make sacred space for experiencing God's love.

Perhaps not much has changed since those ancient times. Our tabernacles are not mobile, but in these strange times, maybe we are truer to the ancient nomadic roots. You at home have made your kitchen table holy. Or your office or bedroom have become a worship space.

Think about the sacred spaces we create to God's glory. Beautiful St. Andrew's United Church in its modern form; a modern complex of homes for a diversity of people, St. Andrew's United Church nestled within. Love was this church community's foundation. In these challenging times, Christ's love reaches out from here, to care for Sudbury's most vulnerable.

A vision grounded in God's lavish love, like the love that compelled Mary to lavish Jesus. Like love that lavished me all those years ago in my crisis. Love baked into muffins given to off the street shelter.

The good news is that in our life together blessing is in receiving and preaching the Christ's Good News through faithful, prophetic, loving actions. For that we can all be truly thankful. Amen.