

Actions speak louder than words

Easter 4C—April 17, 2016

[This transcript was meant for a spoken performance. It is not optimized for a reading experience.]

Pick A or Pick B ... which do you want to hear? Forget about it—you are getting B. This is rare that, on Saturday night, I completely wrote a whole different sermon. So together let's see where we end up.

*Judeans surrounded Jesus, asking
"How long are you going to keep us in suspense?
If you are the Anointed, just say so."*

Will you pray with me? We open to that which we call holy and name God. Time after time you stir us and cause us to ask, to question and to explore who you are to us and who we are to you, here and now. Amen May this be so!

[Play "Diamonds" by La'Porsha Renae]

That is Mississippi-born and raised La'Porsha Renae. She was a contestant on the 15th and final season of American Idol. That was her very first performance in the actual competition. I wanted you to hear not only her voice, but also the response of the audience and the judges. You heard Kelly Clarkson declare after that performance that La'Porsha was the one who was going to win.

Week after week, she continued to climb and build towards that crowning achievement of being the American Idol, the last Idol to bookend the first Idol, Kelly Clarkson.

What people may not realize is that La'Porsha is only 22 years old. She is 22 years old, a mother to an infant daughter. She disclosed during the season that she had recently moved into a shelter and left a marriage that was abusive.

This is a young woman who not only has a gigantic talent but also has a heart to match her voice. She was humble. She was committed. At one point in the season, she said that she knew that she had to audition for the American Idol show because ... well, it was the last.

La'Porsha had decided that if she did not make the cut leading her to audition before the judges, she would travel to the next audition site, and the next and the one after that, until she was heard. Fortunately for her, she made it in at the first call.

If you watched the show, you know what happened. La'Porsha was the one to beat. Her talent and comfort grew and on the final night she was still standing. It was La'Porsha against her fellow Mississippian, contestant Trent Harmon.

La'Porsha, on her Twitter page described herself:

I am very intertwined with my natural culture and heritage. I am proud of who I once was, who I've come to be and who I will become during God's course for my life.

I watched every episode so I could see this young singer perform. Week after week, the judges acknowledged that she was the one to win.

That's the background that I wanted you to know so I can take you into the gospel through another way.

We are still in the Easter season. Last week I talked about the collapse of Jerusalem, the temple and Judaism as it had been up to the year 70 AD. From the time of Jesus up to the destruction, people of the way, as they were called, were a part of Judaism. They were Jewish. There were no Christians.

Today's gospel writing comes out of the collapse, meaning that those who followed the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth reconfigured and reorganized following the destruction.

The group essentially had no choice. Judaism had also shifted, reconfigured and reorganized. Post-destruction Judaism did not include the Christ followers.

Both groups pushed away from one another. As they pushed away, they also compared and contrasted themselves with the other.

The gospel of John is a collaborative, or a collection of writers who were part of the reforming group. The storyteller we call John is writing and using stories to define and to put into words whom this one called Jesus was and is to those followers.

The Johannine community is not the same as the community of Luke, of Matthew. When we talk about the early movement, we need to remember that the early church was not United (or Presbyterian). Each distinct group was putting into words not only who Jesus was to them, but who they, the followers, "that church" was to Jesus.

The early church was redefining and editing their experience of God. Easter was and is the big redefinition of God.

The warrior King Jesus was edited and reinterpreted as a whole different experience of what it meant to be Messiah—"the anointed one".

The storyteller says, *"The Judeans"* (meaning the Jews—remember, they are contrasting and pushing against what had been) *"The Judeans ask, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.'"*

Take notice of the response. *"Jesus answered, 'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in God's name testify to me'"*

I have told you who I am, is followed by action—the works that I do.

The storyteller is addressing the followers, "the church", the people and is communicating what? That words are,

must be,

better be,

connected to action.

The late first-century congregation is being challenged into action. To follow Jesus, to follow this sacred path, is to be connected to action.

Words that are not connected to action have no power. Words that are not connected to action are void of change and impact.

Let me go out on a limb here. To say I am a Christian is to say that the I is in relation to the Christ, to God. That God is a part of the I. That God is a part of me. That God is a part of you. That was the teaching from last week. The listener was reminded that they are in a relationship with God. That relationship is one of action.

Last week and again this week we hear the storytellers using the metaphor of Shepherd. You can well imagine that a shepherd is not just a word but is a way of life.

To be a shepherd means you are working. To be a good shepherd means you are really working. A good shepherd is engaged and active with the sheep. A good shepherd is so connected with the sheep that when one is missing the shepherd goes in pursuit ... that's action. The shepherd goes to find the lost, the one in need.

Today's gospel and the next few weeks' are about the Johannine community redefining who they are. They are redefining their understanding of God through the stories of Jesus that had been passed down from one generation to the next, from one group to another.

It was never ever about words. The Christ is an experience. Easter is not just a word. Easter is the experience of what follows death.

Easter is what follows collapse.

Easter is what follows failure.

Easter is about redefining and raising up ... and doing that again and again.

American Idol held the audience in suspense right to the last five minutes. To my shock and to many's, La'Porsha lost. Trent became the last American Idol.

You might have heard the phrase that "actions speak louder than words".

The confetti didn't have time to settle from the final show. Many reporters seemed to want to interview La'Porsha. Their questions were always about her reaction to the previous night and her losing to Trent.

This young Mississippi 22-year old is a woman of class. She expressed support and adulation for the winner.

She was then asked, being from Mississippi, had she been following the controversy regarding Mississippi's new anti-LGBT law which essentially allows for gay and transgender people to be discriminated against because of Christian beliefs and moral conviction?

This young singer has been holed up in California for the past number of months. She is 22, has a baby and said no, she didn't know anything about the Mississippi law that was just passed.

These are her words:

This is how I feel about the LGBT community: They are people just like us. They're not animals as someone stated before. They're people with feelings. Although all of us may not agree with that particular lifestyle for religious reasons, whatever the reason is, you still treat each other with respect. Everybody is a human being. We should be able to coexist with one another.

A good response. That was where those should have stopped. Renae went on, *"I am one of the people who don't really agree with that lifestyle. I wasn't brought up that way. It wasn't how I was raised."* Still, she added, *"But I do have a lot of friends and a lot of people that I love dearly who are gay and homosexual and they're such sweet, nice people. We should just respect each other's differences and opinions and move on."*

The reaction to her words was swift. The reaction to two words was like kerosene to a fire. Saying "that lifestyle" came with thunderous disapproval and great denouncement of La'Porsha Renae.

Can you see the great disconnect from action speaking louder than words? This young woman has time and time again shown her big heart along with her big talent. She is just 22; she didn't know what the reporter was asking about. 22-year-olds misspeak. 88-year-olds misspeak.

Jesus replies to the question asked, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my God's name testify to me."

If you want to know who I AM, if you want to know I AM, that is the ancient words used to say god, God is I AM. If you want to know I AM, God is in the activity. God is in action.

And, as the last judge in the clip said, "I judge myself by not what I have but what I am willing to give."

I judge myself not by what I have, or even what I say, I judge myself by what I am willing to give. Is that what the gospel is saying? This is something to think about this week because ... this is good news indeed.