

One of my favorite sayings is “talk is cheap,” because all of us learn that it’s true, whether we are buying a new car or hiring a contractor. A person can talk a good game, but if they don’t live up to it, it doesn’t mean much. And this is also true with respect to our faith.

For instance, a person can say “I am a Christian” or profess a belief in God, but what does that mean if it’s not acted out? Someone may be very religious in the sense of going to Mass or praying, but what if they are then cruel to their family, a gossip, or completely oblivious to the needs of others? They may lull themselves into thinking they are a pretty good person, but a wake up call will come at the final judgment.

That’s why for us as Christians, we cannot just say we’ll work in God’s vineyard, but we have to do it.

The saints personify this way of life, and last week, we had the feast day of a remarkable man who truly is a man of both talk and action, Saint Vincent de Paul.

What strikes me with his life is he could have been very focused on moving up in the ranks of the church, or living a comfortable life as a theology professor or used his connections with the wealthy to benefit himself. Indeed for a time, he wanted to serve as a priest but have a more comfortable life, but that all changed after his experience with a wealthy countess put him in a different track.

As far as that comfortable lifestyle, he certainly deserved it.

Vincent grew up in southwest France in the late 16th century. He was the son of a farmer, one of six kids. From an early age though he showed academic gifts, and was hired by the town lawyer to tutor his children, which allowed him to go to the university without cost to his family. He was ordained a priest at the age of 24, and was on his way to a doctorate in theology. Unfortunately for Vincent, he ran into a problem: slavery.

Vincent returned home after getting his degree, and he was on the sea from Marseilles to Narbonne by water. The ship was set upon by pirates in the Mediterranean. Vincent was wounded but put in chains, and the pirates took him to Africa with their human cargo. They landed at Tunis, and he was sold to the highest bidder. Vincent was bought by a fisherman, then resold to an older Muslim, who actually treated him kindly, before he became the property of the man’s nephew.

The nephew was a native of Nice, and actually a lapsed Christian who converted to Islam. He had three wives, and when one of them ran into Vincent working in the field and asked him to sing a song to his God, he sang a Psalm, while getting emotional. This moved the woman to berate her husband for walking away from his faith, and the man actually left Africa with Vincent and went to Avignon, France. The man confessed and returned to his Catholic faith, and actually went to Rome and became part of the order of the Brothers of Saint John of God, who did work in hospitals.

As for Vincent, now back in France, he became known to the “important” people. Among them was a future cardinal, who helped Vincent become a tutor to the children of nobility, among them a countess.

Vincent, while serving this family, heard the confession of a peasant who was on his deathbed. He recovered, but said he would have been lost were it not for Vincent's guidance. This experience with the peasant helped open Vincent de Paul's eyes to the needs of the peasantry in France. The countess actually cared for her servants, which was pretty uncommon at the time in France, and she persuaded Vincent to preach in the parish church of Folleville and teach the people, not just her children. He had an impact. A big one. Massive crowds showed up and he had to call in the Jesuits to help him.

Not too long after this he started working in Paris among imprisoned slaves, and then became leader of the Congregation of the Mission or the Vincentians as it became known due to his leadership. These priests devote themselves to the people in smaller towns and villages.

Now at 50 years old, Vincent didn't slow down. He wanted to do all he could to help suffering people. He founded groups to care for the sick in numerous parishes. He persuaded noble and wealthy Parisian women, who before never gave a thought to the misery of others, to band together as the Ladies of Charity and pool their money to help the less fortunate. Hospitals started to open to help the poor and the prisoners, who were treated inhumanely being forced to serve as galleys of the state - forced rowers on large vessels where a few years of work destroyed their bodies. Vincent also collected Alms to help the suffering people of Lorraine during the 30 years war.

Vincent also had this interior strength too beyond helping the poor. He put up with setback and frustrations, but never wavered in his faith. He was known as a tranquil person. If you met him later in life, you apparently might say too he was never angry, and even tempered, which wasn't who he was at first. He said that except for the grace of God, he would have been "hard and repulsive, rough and cross." He became more tenderhearted as life went on. He even put up with slander, when for six years some thought he stole money from a lawyer he lived with. Rather than fight fire with fire, he simply said "God knows the truth," and when the real thief finally confessed he used the experience at a priest's conference to show that patience, silence and resignation are the best defense of innocence.

He lived until the age of 85, though his later years endured a lot of suffering. He died peacefully in his chair on September 27th, 1660, being canonized in 1737, the patron saint of all charitable societies.

What Vincent did in his life was to have his eyes opened to the needs of others, and then spent the rest of his time on this earth helping as many as possible to realize that our faith is not about our own little world, but about serving all people, for we are all God's children. That was something that can be foreign to us today, but especially to the pre-revolutionary French who were divided sharply among classes, even though most all of these people professed to be Christian. Indeed, Vincent talked the talk, but also walked the walk. The question for us is what will we do?

There is an ancient Japanese legend that tells of a man who dies and goes to heaven. Heaven is beautiful beyond words. In his journey through paradise, the man comes upon a room lined with

shelves. On these shelves are stacks of human ears. A heavenly guide explains that the ears belonged to all the people on earth who listened each week to the word of God, but never acted on God's teachings. Their worship never resulted in action. Therefore, only their ears ended up in heaven.

For you and me as a Christian, we can't be people of piecrust promises or have ears that hear but do not follow them up with actions. God isn't really interested in our telling others "I'm a Catholic" and ending it there. God is interested in our showing others how much we are persons of faith by what we say and do.

The vineyard is where the work is done, and the owner of the vineyard has called us to work in it. So what are we to do?

First and foremost, we have to remember it's never too late. All seemed lost for Vincent when he was enslaved, but look at what happened. A man who owned him who had walked away from his faith and lost his way saw Vincent, conversed with him, and ended up returning to the faith and then going on to help the less fortunate. Many of us are just like that man. We might say "well I'd never do something that extreme," but it's not that hard to gradually lose faith, to push God further and further away. We as Christians have to ask ourselves what our vineyard is like, not just on Ash Wednesday. What does it mean for us to be sent, something we were told on the day of our confirmation? How are we like Vincent modeling the compassion, the forgiveness and love of neighbor that Jesus calls us to in our workplace, our school and community? We have to ask ourselves are we a head nodder like the second son who says "sure I'll do your work" and then forgets about it? Or do we change our minds and hearts as life goes on? Most of us wouldn't reject God outright, but we so often can do through how we lead our lives becoming spiritually lazy. When we have that conversion like Vincent's owner, or even like Vincent have that moment where we realize we are doing good things but see we can glorify God even more through our service, we can reach spiritual excellence. Tax collectors enter heaven before the Pharisees because they realize they need to change, and we do too.

Finally, that leads to action. For Vincent in 17th century France, people thought all was well who had money and power. But that blindness can creep into our lives too. We can lose sight of how we treat others at work, school, at home, or in the service industry. We can become expectant that others should do something for us, or develop a sense of entitlement. One of the inspiring things of serving at Saint Joe's is how I've encountered so many selfless people who do so much to think of the needs of others. We have a group that's gone down for years to help serve in a rural Kentucky parish. We have another group that goes to Haiti, and a youth team going ever summer to help the less fortunate. Charity though has so many layers. We need to think not only of the need far beyond our borders, but of the need here at home, and right under our own roofs. Going to Mass is just part of it - the Mass needs to open our eyes so we then bring God's love to all who need it.

One of my favorite movies is "Field of Dreams," the story of the Iowa farmer who builds a magical field in his corn field turning it into a baseball diamond where long deceased legends of the diamond return to life to play. He's not sure why he is called to build it though; a mysterious voice keeps telling him to "go the distance." On top of this the baseball players are not visible to

all people, and it seems like this effort will cost him his farm and he'll lose it all. Finally though it becomes clear to him why he is going the distance, when in an argument he has with one of the baseball players, Shoeless Joe Jackson he yells "I just want to know what's in it for me!" Shoeless Joe says to him, "is that why you built it Ray, for you?" It becomes clear that he build that field for others, and in the process he comes to learn that it was also about easing the pain of his father, who appears at the end of the film as a young baseball player, finally able to play the game he loved but walked away from to support his family. And in the end, all that hard work not only brought joy to the people who came to Iowa, but to Ray and his father John who finally are reconciled. God is asking us like Ray to go the distance too, but we are creating something far more amazing than even a magical baseball field, we are called to create a world of peace, justice, love and mercy. Let's remember though that our time here isn't about doing it for ourselves, but rather, like Jesus, emptying ourselves not for our own glory but for God's, which requires professing who God is with our lips, but then proclaiming him with our actions. In "Field of Dreams," so many people couldn't see the baseball players until Ray's work enabled them to do so. In life, so many can't see God too because they've lost their way. That's where you and I come in - like Vincent de Paul, may we too go the distance to make God's love known, and bring people to the heavenly kingdom through our words and actions.