

## **What's the Good Word?**

**By Bishop Paul V. Marshall**

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“How could I have time for that? It’s impossible.” The young mother was aghast.

Another member of the knitting group had not suggested that she take on some community service project or learn to play the violin.

Her friend had read in the science section of a newspaper that children grow up with healthier personalities if they receive ten words or gestures of parental approval for every correction that comes their way.

As the mothers talked, she realized that small gestures of approval and encouragement were not that hard to offer if parents simply worked to make a habit of it.

They encouraged each other to make sure that the primary message their children receive is value, support and encouragement.

I heard this story, with gratitude, from one of the participants – but with a certain detachment. It seemed obvious. Children believe the majority report, the message they predominantly get about themselves. It had a familiar ring: ten parts of one ingredient to one part of another. I soon forgot the whole thing.

The story came back a few weeks later when another columnist cited research that couples who enjoy successful marriages report at least five times as many positive as negative interactions in their relationship.

That observation did not slide by. Although the nest is empty, we are still in it. There is a discipline to staying married that is not merely a matter of luck and personal complementarity: there is the care couples take to be pleasant and the time they budget for the relationship. How we intentionally are with each other makes the marriage.

Together these secular newspaper reports of what makes for sturdy children and long-lasting marriages re-focused what Christians celebrate in the Christmas and Epiphany seasons that take up December and January. The word became flesh. That has practical implications for me this year.

On the grand scale, “the word became flesh” means that all God intends for us is found in human form in Jesus who is that word to and for us. The New Testament says that in contact with him we receive grace and truth. What Jesus said and did, who he was, had an effect on people.

This could be true of Jesus because it is true of everyone. In each of our encounters with those around us we give a message: presence or distance, worth or non-worth, interest or disdain, and so on. The “incarnational principle,” if I may call it that, is how we humans

are wired. We do not have a choice about being a “word” to others we encounter. The choice we have is what kind of word we shall be.

Christians glory in their belief that Jesus uniquely was God’s word to us. We, like all of humanity, are less talented at asking what kind of “word” each of us is to the world.

When it is over, what will your life have said to loved ones, co-workers, and the larger community?

As January is the month of making resolutions, the month of course-correction, it might be useful to reflect on what message our deeds and words give to those around us about their worth. What message do we give?

As I contemplate those questions for myself I wish I could raise my children a bit differently, but that is not possible. I am, however, about to go out the door and into the streets of my town, where every possibility exists to be a good word.

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