Years ago, when I worked in corporate finance there was a woman in our IT department who was really good at listening to what it was you needed and then promising to find a solution for your issue. The only problem was she never followed through on anything. You would leave a meeting feeling wonderful, like all your data needs were going to be taken care of and then slowly grow disillusioned as you continued to be told that she would get to it next week. Ultimately it became apparent that she was never actually going to do anything. I guess you could say she was kind of an IT Gnostic – she solved your computing problems in the spiritual realm, not the physical. And I was reminded of her today because of an exhortation we have in 1st John. It reads, “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” In other words when it comes to love, lip service is not enough. It is a similar idea to the parable Jesus tells of the two sons whose father asks them to go and work in the vineyard. If you recall one son says he will and does not while the other says he will not but does. Jesus ends by asking the question of who did the will of the father, and the answer is the one who actually went and worked. From these two bits of scripture, we could get the idea that God only cares about our actions and not our words. But when we look elsewhere in the Bible, we see there are many warnings about our words like when Jesus says in Matthew 12:36 and 37, “I tell you, on the day of judgement men will render account for every careless word they utter; for by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned.”

And so, what are we supposed to do? How much of our walk of faith is words and how much of it is deeds? To my mind, when we look at the totality of scripture and not just this passage from 1st John, we see that we are to reflect God’s love in thought word and deed, which seems consistent with what we experience and expect in our day to day lives. Think of it like this. Let’s say there are two people who told a loved one that they would pick them up from the airport. The first pays attention to the landing time and arrives to greet then as the come out of the gate area. Upon seeing them they tell them that they love them. Now the second person on the day of the loved one’s arrival swings by Hogg Alley, then gets carried away while listening to Journey and starts eating chicken wings and drinking Hamm’s beer, forgetting all about the trip to the airport. Upon receiving a text from their loved one about their whereabouts they text back and tell them that they love them. And maybe it is the Hamm’s talking or maybe it is sincere, but either way I am pretty sure the person stranded at the airport does not feel loved by the guy at Hogg Alley.

And this brings up an important distinction when we talk about love. I think often love is seen as a feeling – we fall in love; we have love in our heart and so on. And that is true but is not complete. For while I think there is certainly emotion and something ethereal that is involved in the idea of love, there is also action associated with it. Think about John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” The structure of it starts with an acknowledgement of God’s love and then moves to the result of that love. He loved so much that he sent his son. It does not say that God so loved the world that he said I love you and sent out some good vibes. No, it moves from the idea of love to something quite physical -- Jesus came to earth.

Often, I think we might prefer a religion that operates more in the word and speech arena than it does in the truth and action realm because it can be a lot easier. That is why the idea of magic never goes away, even in Christianity. Magic is about getting the words just right and then getting what we want. It is easier to say someone should do something about the problems of the world, but it is much more difficult to actually do something about the problems of the world. Just as it is much easier to tell a newborn baby you love them than it is to get up three times during the night to feed them and change their diaper. But we know love cannot be neatly separated to spiritual and physical but must be exhibited in all things. Like St. Paul says in Colossians, “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The struggle between word and deed is in many ways a personal issue. What I mean by this is we all have certain situations in life where we are much better at talking about them than we are doing something about them. And the inverse is also true. We are sometimes better at doing what is right than we are in talking about what is right. And so, the take home I want to have in today’s sermon is not about pointing fingers or saying who the people are who do little more than talk. Rather, I want to be a little more introspective, to think about where we excel in words over deeds and vice versa. I know for me personally being a very shy person, I can often be better at interpreting a situation off in a corner by myself than I am at moving into action where I could possibly make a spectacle of myself. So rather than dealing with an actual issue I think about it a lot and maybe even do a little triangulating by talking about the issue with a third person. I can often substitute talk for action. And obviously, there are a number of things we can only talk about, like the war in the Ukraine or the horrible conditions in North Korea. But that does not get us off the hook. A theme I return to again and again is what can we do where we are. How can we love in truth and action where we are, with the people we deal with on a day-to-day basis.

During this past Superbowl there were a few ads put out by the Servant Foundation about Jesus with the tagline, “He Gets Us.” After these ads were run there was some criticism, especially over the money spent. The theme of most of the criticism was that Jesus would have wanted this money spent on the poor rather than ads during a football game. But assuming that these commercials were an effective means of evangelism (which I know is a big assumption), I think God wants both. The news of the Gospel is to so fill us that it spills out of us in all that we do, as the poet Hopkins says it should be, “like shining from shook foil.” There really should be no part of our being that is not infused with God. In what we read from 1st John this morning there is a call away from words and towards action. However, as we have seen in other parts of scripture words are important as well. And so, the reading is meant not as an injunction for all people at all times but is rather targeting those who are all talk and no action. To my mind as we grow in holiness and in our love for God nothing can be cordoned off from God. Everything we do should be about God’s love. We need to have integrity, being consistent in thought, word and deed, so that we may show God’s love to this broken and hurting world and be his own this day and forevermore.