

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8
Psalm 15:2-3, 3-4, 4-5
James 1:17-18, 21B-22, 27
Mark 7:108, 14-15, 21-23
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Some years ago, at a zoo in New York, the elephant keeper noticed that one of his charges, a female elephant named Sophie, had picked up a stick with her trunk, and was using the stick to trace patterns in the dirt. Over the next several days, he noticed that Sophie made a regular habit of scratching the ground in this way. The keeper was curious. Was Sophie merely scratching the dust at random, or was she a real artist? After all, elephants are renowned for their intelligence, and her keeper thought that Sophie was especially clever.

The zookeeper set out to discover the answer to his question. He brought several large sheets of paper to the elephant compound, and substituted a paintbrush for Sophie's stick. He placed the paper on the ground in front of Sophie, dipped the brush in paint, and gave it to her. Sophie caught on immediately. She was clearly delighted with this improvement over her usual medium of stick and dirt. With a few deft movements of her trunk she applied paint to paper. The difficulty was to determine when Sophie was finished with a particular piece. The keeper decided that whenever she paused in her work, he would replace the paper with a fresh sheet.

In this way, Sophie soon used up all the paper, and her keeper was left with a portfolio of her work. He was delighted with the results. True,

he couldn't recognize anything in the paintings, but he thought Sophie might be one of those modern, abstract artists. Now he needed an expert opinion, so he picked out his favorites from among the paintings, and took them to New York University, where he showed them to a famous artist and critic. Unfortunately, I can't remember the expert's name, but I'm sure you'd recognize it if you heard it.

The expert looked through the paintings, muttered a mild expletive and said, "I don't know who did these, but whoever it is, he is very talented." The zookeeper replied, "Well actually. . .it's a she." The expert retorted, "Then *she* is very talented! Such boldness and freedom of line! If only I could get my own students to fill a canvas like this. They hesitate. They're afraid to make mistakes, so their work is pedestrian and constricted. Here on the other hand is confidence and boldness of execution. I tell you unequivocally, the woman who painted these is a true artist." The keeper replied, "Well actually. . .she's an elephant." When he recovered from his shock, the expert retorted, "Then this *elephant* is a talented artist." Now Sophie more than earns her keep by the sale of her work to collectors.

I am reminded of this story by James' insistence in our second reading that we must *act* on the word of God. "Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves." Too often, even the most faithful Christians fear to act upon what they believe. They are like art students who hesitate before a blank canvas for fear of making a mistake. If we get caught up in this hesitation, this fear, our contribution to the world and to the Kingdom of God, can be cramped and stunted. We can bury the talents God has given us.

In our Gospel Jesus speaks of people who are careful to obey all the

minor rules of their religion, but who never get to the heart of the matter. They never get around to loving God and neighbor with freedom and passion. They are like artists who find the perfect smock, choose just the right frame, and the right light, and who lay out their paints in the prescribed order, but who never lay brush to canvas.

How often we look back on our day and think, “There was a moment when I could have spoken up on behalf of my faith, or could have defended some absent person who was being slandered. There was a moment when I could have spoken a kind word, or comforted someone in need. There was a time when I should have prayed or tried to right an injustice. Perhaps the story of Sophie can inspire us to fill our life’s canvas with boldness and confidence. If we are to be God’s hands in the world, we have to take those hands out of our pockets. We have to overcome our fear of failure and embarrassment, and trust that Christ will bring good out of what we dare to attempt on his behalf. And if we appear to make fools of ourselves, well, then we are fools for Christ, and that is no bad thing to be.