

“Saying Yes and Saying No”
Text: II Corinthians 1:15-22; Matthew 5:33-37
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“Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”
Matthew 5:37

If you are in the habit of imagining the people in the Bible as beatific beings who live trouble-free lives and spend most of their waking hours polishing their halos, then this Sunday’s reading from II Corinthians might make you want to re-think that assumption. The passage that Chris read reveals all sorts of tensions. There have been ongoing antagonisms between some of the members of the Corinthian congregation and Paul, who had been their founder several years before. The last time Paul had been in Corinth, one member of the church had publicly insulted Paul and embarrassed him, though I’m not sure Paul was capable of being embarrassed. Now, there is new tension because Paul had planned to stop by Corinth, both on his way from Ephesus to Macedonia, and then to stop again on his way back, before he went on to Jerusalem. He had told the Corinthians that he would see them twice, but his plans have changed, and he will have time for only one visit instead of two. The Corinthians got put out with Paul, and Paul was put out with them because they were put out with him.

I know this all sounds sort of silly. Maybe Oprah Winfrey or Dr. Phil could have helped. Feelings run deep about these sorts of things - how often one should visit and how long you should stay and so on and so forth. I remember a few years ago inviting 16 members of my husband’s family, which is my family too, for dinner. On Thanksgiving morning I was madly shopping the celery to put in the dressing when the phone rang. One of our nephews was on the other end of the line saying that he and his wife had forgotten to set the alarm clock, and they would not be driving over from Birmingham for the holiday dinner after all. I was nice on the telephone, but when we hung up, it took me a little while to gather myself together and reset the table and so forth. I was in kind of a grumpy mood there for a minute. I said to Al, “If you can’t come, don’t come, but don’t say you will and not show up!”

Paul offers no excuse, none whatsoever, not even the old alarm clock excuse for his change of plans. Rather, he reassures the Corinthians that he really had intended to do them a double favor. “Do you think I was vacillating when I told you I was going to stop by going and coming? No I wasn’t, because I don’t make my plans according to ordinary human standards.” While his readers were just trying to get their minds wrapped around what he meant by “I don’t make my plans according to human standards...” Paul moves on to God and how God’s plans are made. “God’s nature,” Paul maintains, “is not at all undecided, but is revealed through the Son of God as being always focused and single-minded.” Paul writes, “For the Son of God was not ‘yes’ or ‘no’. In him, it is always ‘yes’.”

If you remember nothing else that is said this morning, that's a great statement to take home with you. God intends to say Yes to you and to this broken human race, and if a No is ever said, it's always for the sake of the integrity of the Yes, and not ever for the sake of the negativity alone. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" God says "yes" to humanity.

It is striking to learn that saying "yes" or "no" is not simply a matter of better time management. There are spiritual dimensions involved. If it is not God's nature to say two things at once, then we ought to at least think twice before we allow double mindedness to get a foothold in our own character. In the Sermon on the Mount, not in the passage I just read, but in the Beatitudes, Jesus says, "Blessed are the pure in heart." Who are the pure in heart? They are the single-minded ones, the focused ones. And what is their reward? You can't get any better than their reward. *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

How humbling it is to realize how far we have to go when mastering this aspect of the Christian life. We say one thing and we really want to mean what we say, but actually what we said is pretty much impossible, and we're not going to be able to follow through on what we said. And there we are, creating lives for ourselves that end up so frenzied and so full, that ironically, they become empty of all the really important things.

God might be single-minded, and surely Michael Phelps is single-minded, but most of us have to struggle in order to make clear choices, to say what we mean and mean what we say, and to keep our word, to have our "yes" be "yes". We tell ourselves that the reason we're overextended is that we care. We care about our family or we care about our community. The other reason we're over extended is that we wanted to say no, but we did not want to hurt the feelings of the person who asked us, so we say "yes" when, God knows, we should have said "no".

But there is an even darker side. We also want to live up to whatever grand image we have of ourselves, forgetting that to be human is to live within limits. Only God exists without limits. The John Edwards debacle of recent days is a telling illustration. The Senator has lived his life in recent years at least, as if he were not subject to the very moral code he espoused during the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, and all along the campaign trail. He spoke one thing and did another. He got all mixed up over what he should say "yes" to and what he should say "no" to. You cannot say "yes" to both a mistress and a wife. You cannot say one thing and do another. You cannot say you are qualified to run for the White House and live a life that reveals personal character that does not know how to make an honorable set of choices. To be human is to live within limits.

We rejoice today in the beginning of the new church school year. As a church, we are saying "yes" to the education of the children and young people and adults who make up our faith community. The goal, in fact, is for all of us to be able to make some progress on what Dorothy Bass calls "the life-long learning project of figuring out to what and to whom we ought to give our yes." (1) That is perhaps the most important task we have before us.

I can think of no better role model than Jesus himself who had to say “no” to a lot of things. When he first answered God’s call, and then all the way along, he had to make choices about where he would go and whom he would help. If he was up in the Galilee region, then he wasn’t in Jerusalem, was he? He gave his attention to a mind-boggling number of needs, but he paid attention to only one at a time. He said “no” to fame and power and “yes” to humility and the cross. He never let his life control him; he was always in control of his life. Our church can help us all learn and grow and develop the spiritual gift of discerning that which makes for life and separating that from those things which eventually rob life of its meaning. Think about your own life. Behind every yes are hundreds of implicit no’s: if you marry one partner, that means you have eliminated other partners; if you go to law school, you’re probably not going to be a doctor or an engineer; if you say “yes” to chairing one big committee, then you ought to know that you can’t chair another big committee. We do not have limitless supplies of time and energy.

Ralph Potter is an ethicist at Harvard Divinity School. He writes very compellingly about the necessity of setting limits by making responsible choices. “We must live within our means,” he writes, “not only our financial means but within our psychological, intellectual, and social means. A sure sign of not having mastered the practice of saying “yes” when we ought to and “no” when we ought to, is being always overextended and busy.(2) I appreciate your not guffawing when someone like me says what I just said to someone like you, since I’m pretty much over extended and busy all the time. This is a sermon I could preach to myself in the mirror. But isn’t it life itself that makes things so complicated? Do you remember when you went to the grocery store, and there was whole wheat bread, and there was white bread? I’m just having a breakdown standing there before the nine grains and the 15 grains and a hearty slice and small slice, and then they marble the two together, and you’re just in a mess. It’s harder to decide these days.

I need a new keyboard for my computer, and I asked AI if he would help me find one, so he goes online and prints out 30 choices for me. I just want one regular keyboard!

We spend so much time making these kinds of choices. We have such a cluttered life that we cannot pay attention to the people that we love. We find ourselves making a less than helpful contribution to society because we are over-extended and then inevitably ineffective. Paul asks, “Do you make your plans according to human standards?” What he means is saying “yes and no” to everything, trying to please everybody. Paul says that he tries to live his life in a posture of dependence on God, whose will does not vacillate and whose word is sure. (3) Someone wise has said that discipline is remembering what you want, and in order to have that kind of discipline, we need to understand what God is like. God says “yes” to that which leads to life and wholeness and redemption and “no” to everything that is an enemy of life and wholeness, anything that would distort or pervert human community.

Here’s the thing: if God says “yes” to us in Jesus Christ, then that must mean that you and I are of value. We must mean something to God, and therefore we ought to mean something to ourselves, and if we do, we won’t overload our lives with a lot of this and that and the other.

I came across a hilarious sermon by an Episcopal priest in another city who writes about one day at the beginning of Advent, when he set out to drive to a 7:30 meeting. He was on the cell phone trying to get directions when a truck in front of him pulled out suddenly, and the priest's car smacked right into the truck. The truck driver and the priest got out. The truck was fine; the driver just waved and said, "No problem. See ya". The priest had to have his car towed away. Turned out it was totaled. He called his wife, and they arranged for the priest to drive his wife's car. As he was talking on the cell phone to the insurance agent while driving his wife's car that afternoon, an SUV turned right in front of him – kaboom! That car was totaled as well. (4) Is there a lesson here? At least: be wary of multi-tasking.

Yes indeed, you can hold the baby, stir the soup, talk on the telephone, and push the dog out from under you with your right foot, but you really don't have to do all of those things at the same time. No, you don't have to, not if you want to live the life that God wants you to live.

I love these words of Michel de Montaigne, written in the 16th century, but so relevant for us today. "We must reserve a back shop, all our own, entirely free, in which to establish our real liberty and our principal retreat and solitude." Do you have a back shop, a place inside yourself where you can go and sort out what matters from what really doesn't matter? It was our Lord himself, who said, "Let your word be 'yes,' or 'no, no'. Anything else comes from the evil one."

Follow your Lord, rejoicing in the knowledge that all who have followed his way, across the centuries, have never, ever found it wanting. Give your heart and your time to those things that really matter, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well for you and for the world that God loves. Amen.(5)

(1) *Practicing our Faith*, Dorothy C. Bass, ed., p.67.

(2) Harvard Divinity School Bulletin, Vol.27/No 1, 1997, p.6.

(3) *Interpretation: Second Corinthians*, p.18.

(4) Kenneth Swanson, "The Eleventh Deadly Sin" 12/3/06.

(5) Julian of Norwich.