

Saying Yes and Saying No

Matthew 21:28-32

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Today Jesus challenges us with another parable.

Once again, he asks us to choose
between living within the world's point of view
or living within God's point of view.

In this parable, Jesus imagines the reign of God like a father who has 2 sons

We hear, the father "went" to the first son . . .

The Greek actually says the father *approaches* the first son
Or
the father *draws near* the first son
That has such a different feel . . .
a bit more tenuous
less certain

He begins to speak, and says affectionately, "*my dear son . . .*"

And then the father's tone suddenly changes,
the father tells the son to go work in the father's vineyard.
It's an order, not a request.

And the son,
like many of us do when we are suddenly ordered to do something, says,
"I will not!"
The words he uses tells us that his tone is
"resolved, determined" and "forceful"

The father doesn't argue.
He accepts the answer.
And goes to find the other son.

But afterwards --
this word, "afterwards," tells us there's a transition to something new,
that he takes a second look,
he reconsiders --

Afterwards, after a second look, the first son "changes his mind"
He regrets

He changes his mind
He turns around
(this is what the word “repent” means!)

And, we hear, simply, that he “went”
The word is not really that direct
It’s closer meaning is *to follow*
He goes in order to follow his father

So a closer reading is:

The father approaches the first son, and orders him,
“My dear son, you go and work in my vineyard today.”
The son answers, “I will not!”
But then he takes a second look,
feels regret, reconsiders, changes his mind,
and follows his father.

Then, the father approaches the other of his two sons
and, in the same way, orders him,
“My dear son, you go and work in my vineyard today.”

This son has a different response.
Jesus tells us:
“And he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go.”

A closer reading is:
But the son answers, “*I* will go forth, master!” and then does *not* follow his father.
(His “I” is emphatic, and his “not” is an absolute negative.)

So hear the story one more time . . .

The father approaches the first son, and orders him,
“My dear son, you go and work in my vineyard today.”
The son answers, “I will not!”
But then he takes a second look,
feels regret, reconsiders, changes his mind,
and follows his father.
Then, the father approaches the other of his two sons
and, in the same way, orders him,
“My dear son, you go and work in my vineyard today.”
But the son answers,
“*I* will go forth, master!”
and then does *not* follow his father.

Jesus then asks his followers,

“Which of the two sons brings the father’s heart’s desire into being?

They said, “The first.”

Jesus said to them,

“Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes
are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.”

Now, the tax collectors were Roman collaborators,
and that is why people loathed them,

The prostitutes mentioned here are not the women of the red light district,
actually, they are the sacred prostitutes of Astarte, the Caananite religion

And their way of “going” into the kingdom is a type of “going”
that describes the movement from prison to freedom.

So . . . hear it again:

Jesus says to his followers,

“Truly I say to you,
the Roman collaborators and the Babylonian idol worshippers
are leading the way from imprisonment
into the full freedom of the reign of God,
and they are leading the way for your sakes.”

And then Jesus continues. He says:

“John arrived

and showed you the advantages of the way of integrity
and you did *not* have confidence in it.

On the other hand, the Roman collaborators and the Babylonian idol worshippers
had confidence in this path.

Even when you saw what you needed to do,
you did not take a second look
and reconsider having confidence in living in this way.”

You see, another word for righteousness is integrity --
the alignment, the matching, of our inner and outer life.

Righteousness is not about “having it together”
and looking good.

It’s about being who we are,
here and now,

warts and gifts,
angers and joys,
and telling the truth about who and how we are.
Think of David, and the psalms.

David told God exactly what he thought.
He didn’t mince words.

He didn't hide anything from God
in an effort to look squeaky clean.
David was wholehearted before God.
He was a man of integrity – even with his mistakes.
He was righteous.

Integrity.

This is where Jesus is aiming.
This is the challenge of this parable.

So often we are like the second son,
we say “yes” because we are focused on saying the “right” thing,
being liked by others,
on being “good,”
and we don't say “no”
because we don't want to rock the boat
or offend anyone.

And we tell others they cannot say “no,” either.
We tell them they must be polite.

Yet we know from this parable,
that “no” is an acceptable response.

In fact, there is something okay with saying “no.”
The father accepts “no” as an answer,
there is no problem with it.
It is an honest answer.

The ability to say “no”
and the freedom to say “no”
are important.

In fact, there is no such thing as an honest and freely given “yes”
unless “no” is an equally acceptable answer in that moment.
If a person can't say “no” to a request,
their “yes” is coerced.

When I ask someone if s/he is available to do something,
I would rather have a solid “no” from them
than a mushy “yes.”

If a person says “yes”
and it is not a truly wholehearted “yes” --
it is not coming out of integrity.
and often – like the second son –
they will not follow through
on their commitments.

If a person can say “no” when they are asked to do something
I know they have a good sense of their boundaries
and what they can and cannot do.
I know I can ask them again sometime

and if they say “yes,” they will mean it and do it.
And if they say “no,” they are being honest about their limitations.
They are acting in integrity.
And they can always reconsider.

“No” is an important word.

It is one of the first words we learn – think of two-year olds!
We get into difficulty,
we lose ourselves,
when we do not say it.

The film, “The Help” is set in Jackson, Mississippi in the mid-1960s.
It is a story about the white women and the black maids they employ.
It is also a story about the power of peer pressure
and the power of saying “yes” and saying “no.”

Those of you who have seen the film
remember the moment when Skeeter’s mother
went along with looking “good”
and being “respectable” and “honorable”
and failed to say “No”
to the powerful women
who demanded that she fire her m
She regretted her failure for years,
and she had been physically ill ever since.
Then she faced another moment,
when she could have said “No”
but she stood firm and said “No”
and ordered Miss Hilly off her property.
She tells Skeeter that she did this because she had decided to live.
Saying “No” to racism and hatred was an act of integrity.
And once she acted in integrity,
in righteousness,
her health improved.

At the same time, Abilene says “No.”
She says “No” to telling her story.
She doesn’t want to risk her life and the lives of her friends
and their jobs as maids.
She is well aware of the ways African Americans in Jackson, Mississippi
were being beaten and sometimes killed for speaking up.
Abilene says, “No,” in her own integrity.
And Skeeter honors Abilene’s answer of “No.”
But after hearing her pastor preach about the courage of Moses,
Abilene changes her mind.
She says “Yes” to Skeeter

and begins telling her story.
She tells her story with integrity,
in true righteousness,
wholeheartedly,
even though she is terribly afraid.
And, later, Abilene says that telling the truth is what freed her.

Pastor Thomas Swears puts it this way:

He says,

“Saying yes faithfully begins with saying no well.”

He also says,

“Whenever a decision either for yes or for no
is made on the basis of such calculated considerations as,
“What will they think of me if I don't do it?”
justification is being sought for a harried and unfree life,
one that is bound to the opinions and desires of others.
But, when a life is rooted in the presence of Christ,
with a single focus,
then either yes or no can be spoken,
not on the basis of what others will think
or out of guilt,
but from what the Quakers call
an inward rising
to encourage or discourage the acceptance of the task. . . .
A life with such a center can be more simply lived
but it is not simplistic.”

Each of us has to know where our life is centered,

This week Jesus asks us to choose:

We can live within the world's point of view
and say “yes”

to please others,

to live up to the performance expectations of others,

or to live up to self-imposed perfectionism.

or

We can live within God's point of view

and say “No”

and “Yes”

with integrity

being honest about who we are

Jesus reminds us that we are not called to look good.

we are not called to be polite.

We are called to act with integrity,

and to speak as God's free children –

and to remember that “No” is a word of
possibility and freedom.

Sources:

Strong's Concordance

The Approaching Sabbath: Spiritual Disciplines for Pastors by Thomas Swears

"The Hope" by Kathryn Stockett

Transformational Leadership and the Care of Souls by Anne Dilenschneider

Text:

Matthew 21:28-32

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went.

The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go.

Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Or, more closely from the Greek:

The father approaches the first son, and orders him, "My dear son, you go and work in my vineyard today.' The son answers, "I will not!" But then he takes a second look, feels regret, reconsiders, changes his mind, and follows his father.

Then, the father approaches the other of his two sons and, in the same way, orders him, "My dear son, you go and work in my vineyard today.'" But the son answers, "I will go forth, master!" and then does *not* follow his father.

Jesus asks, "Which of the two sons brings the father's heart's desire into being?"

His followers say, "The first."

Jesus says to them, "Truly I say to you, the Roman collaborators and the Babylonian idol worshippers are leading the way from imprisonment into the full freedom of the reign of God, and they are leading the way for your sakes.

Here's the conclusion: John arrived and showed the advantage of the way of integrity and you did *not* have confidence in it. On the other hand, the Roman collaborators and the Babylonian idol worshippers had confidence in this path. Even when you saw what you needed to do, you did not take a second look and reconsider having confidence in living in this way.