

“Saying Yes Is Not Enough”

- I. Introduction. When we lived in Kingsport, occasionally late on Sunday evenings after a busy day at church had ended, I would turn on the televised coverage of the British House of Parliament. The Members of Parliament challenge Tony Blair, the Prime Minister, in rapid-fire questions about the government’s handling of Afghanistan or some domestic issue, such as the National Health Service. I was often amazed by his ability as Prime Minister to fend off these challenges.

- II. Jesus himself was also subjected to intense challenges as he moved throughout the countryside teaching and healing. Jesus’ teaching was radical and got the attention of the wealthy religious and political establishment. It may be hard for us to fully discern how truly radical Jesus’ teaching really was, but believe me, even when Jesus’ radical message is preached today, the comfortable and entitled among us still get nervous.

For example, look at what Jesus said in today’s reading from Matthew. First, in his parable of the two sons, Jesus points out that the son who said no, then changed his mind and did what his father asked him to do, was the righteous one. The son who was agreeable, said the right thing, but didn’t follow up, was the son with the problem – the unrighteous son. In other words, it is the son or daughter who lives out the gospel in action who pleases God the Father. The yes is in the doing, not in the saying. Then, after telling this parable, Jesus really obliterated the religious leaders who were trying to trick him. He said in front of all those who had gathered to hear him that the prostitutes and tax collectors were going to go into heaven ahead of the very religious leaders who were trying to entrap him. Prostitutes and tax collectors were unclean: they were to be shunned and avoided. Jesus had the audacity to assert that they would go into heaven before the religious leaders. No wonder his crucifixion was getting closer.

III. What I would like to emphasize today is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about change and action, not about respectability. In an ironic way, those of us who might even first have said “no” to God often turn out to be the very best disciples. Coming back to God after having first said “no” involves a change of heart and a willingness to reach out to God for help. When we recognize with humility that we desperately need God’s help and reach out for that help, we can learn that God really does respond to us. The reaching out comes first and then God’s response. We won’t experience that sitting comfortably in neutral gear.

Let me give you an example of how God responds when we reach out to Him. In a prior church where I ministered, while preparing my sermon I had an unusual sense that God wanted me to use a particular example from my previous work in HIV/AIDS. I was skeptical about using this example because very few people in the congregation had had personal experiences with HIV/AIDS. The point of my illustration was that in my HIV/AIDS work, first in Indianapolis and later in New York City, I had learned an incredibly important spiritual lesson: namely, that even though many of the people I’d worked with grew more and more ill physically, they had at the same time become healed spiritually. Time after time they had affirmed life by taking actions they had put off. Many had reconciled with family members; others choose new professional paths; one wrote a book. Many resolved their problems with God in the process of making new life choices even as they faced death. In addition, those of us who worked with people with HIV/AIDS often were spiritually healed as well. I preached my sermon, using the example I felt led to use, and afterwards greeted parishioners on the porch of the church. A middle-aged woman who I’d not met before waited until everyone else had left and then came up to me with the following story. She was HIV+. No one knew that, not even her adult children. After learning this news, she had isolated herself from many people, including her church. She had assumed, perhaps accurately, that some in her church would judge her because of her HIV+ status. Since learning of her illness, this woman had pulled out of the church and turned away from God. She had come close to giving up on life. But that day she had prayed a deep prayer to God asking to become reconnected to another Christian who would help her. She had never been to our church before, but felt that God had led her to go to that service that evening.

She had felt that there was no hope, but she had reached out to God in prayer. God had responded and she had taken action to follow his lead. Now she could begin to

heal spiritually. And she took further action – she didn't just say yes to coming to that one service. She was open to accept God's answer to her prayer. She began to attend services on a regular basis and began to build relationships with other Christians in the church. She took a series of steps to move closer to God and to experience God's presence in her life.

- IV. Saying and acting on "Yes" in the church. I would like to invite us to really think hard about the message in today's parable. Jesus lifted and still lifts up people to positions of honor and priority whom others often perceive or judge to be marginal. This is another example of the Great Reversal that we discuss so often. The last will be first and the first will be last. Each will experience what it will be like to be in the other's position. There are many categories of people in our own time who might be perceived as marginal, such as the poor, the homeless, the huge number of youth and adults in prison, the chronically mentally ill, and the dependent elderly. Matthew repeatedly tells us that God loves all of these folks very, very much. I know from my own ministry what horrific life experiences many of them have had. I know also that some of them have cried out to God for help. Part of that help needs to come from and through us.

We have to be mighty careful, you and I. We're in that spot where it would be easy to be like the son who says yes to what God calls us to do, but then doesn't do anything or perhaps does very little indeed. God takes his call to value the marginal and those with great needs very seriously. This year we have adopted a plan to commit 10% of our income to mission projects. As John Robertson challenged us last week, we as a community are being called to take a step forward in faith.

And we need to be very mindful that when folks come through these doors, God is sending them to Ascension -- whether they are coming to worship with us, to a Christian education class, or to another activity here. Our hospitality, our acceptance, and our friendship could be an answer to their prayers. We are on holy ground here. This is God's church and this is where we are to learn together how to reach out to God more fully, to hear God's response, and then to act upon his call through the resources that God gives us. It is my hope that at Ascension we will say "yes" to the Gospel through our actions, in very tangible and immediate ways. Thanks be to God.