

Sermon
Proper 8C, June 30, 2019
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church

A dozen years ago, more or less, a woman asked me a question that has proved to be one of the most important questions I've ever been asked.

I was in my first few years of the formal process of discerning a call to Holy Orders, and I was sitting with Sister Kathleen, a white haired Roman Catholic nun, in the little basement office she used for spiritual direction at the Franciscan School of Theology, nestled at the top of "Holy Hill" in Berkeley, CA.

I was a new mom, struggling to balance the demands of being a wife, and parenting a toddler, and working as a Youth Minister, and discerning a call to the priesthood. "Sylvia", she said, "whenever you are asked to do something, you need to pause and ask yourself, **'If I say 'yes' to this, to what am I saying 'no'. And if I say 'no' to this, to what am I saying 'yes.'**"

In our lives, we are bombarded with choices--with opportunities, with demands, with expectations, with responsibilities, with desires...

And, while there are a few infinite resources in the universe--God's love and God's grace being the two that immediately spring to mind--most of our resources are, in fact, limited. On our planet, for example, many of our natural resources are limited: like it or not, we have limited quantities of clean water, and arable land, and fossil fuels on earth. Likewise, as individuals, many of our personal resources are limited: like it or not, we have limited quantities of money, and time, and energy. Contrary to the propaganda of late stage capitalism that bombards us 24/7--the truth is we CAN'T be it all, do it all, or have it all. In almost every choice we face--as individuals, as a church, as a society, as a global community, Sister Kathleen's question offers a helpful starting place--and a reality check.

'If we say 'yes' to this, to what are we saying 'no'. And if we say 'no' to this, to what are we saying 'yes.'"

Sometimes answering the question is pretty simple, although following through on its implications may still not be easy.

For example:

If I say "yes" to binge-watching Netflix, I am saying "no" to a good night's sleep...

If I say "yes" to answering this text at the dinner table, I am saying "no" to uninterrupted time with my spouse or kids...

If I say "yes" to a new car I am saying "no" to fulfilling my financial pledge to the church...

These choices are pretty clear. But most of the time, discerning the most faithful choice is a little more complicated:

If I say “yes” to shopping at Walmart, then I am saying “yes” to saving money so I can say “yes” to increasing my charitable giving, but I am also saying “no” to supporting local businesses, fair labor practices, and sustainable models of production and consumption.

If I say “no” to answering emails or calls on my day off, then I am saying “yes” to my family, “yes” to my health, “yes” to God’s commandment to keep the Sabbath; “yes to my ordination vow to “fashion my life and that of my family so as to be a wholesome example to my flock”; but I am also saying “no” to people, and projects, and meetings, and needs that are really important.

Jesus says “Follow me!”

If I say “yes” to following Jesus, I am saying “yes” to a great adventure--but I am also saying “no” to any assurance of welcome, or popularity, or security, or stability. *“Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Jesus says.*

If I say “yes” to following Jesus”, I am saying “yes” to becoming part of a family of faith that transgresses the boundaries of space and time and embraces people of every tribe and tongue and language and nation; but I am saying “no” to deeply ingrained familial, and cultural and religious expectations, I am saying “no” to ties of blood and ancestral obligations. *“Let the dead bury their own dead.” Says Jesus.*

If I say “yes” to following Jesus, I am saying “yes” to a future in which God’s dream is my dream, God’s priorities are my priorities, God’s work is my work, God’s Kingdom is my Home; but I am saying “no” to nostalgia for the past...for the dreams, and priorities, and work and home I’ve left behind. *“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.” Jesus says.*

‘If I say ‘yes’ to this, to what am I saying ‘no’. And if I say ‘no’ to this, to what am I saying ‘yes.’

We read in today’s Gospel that Jesus has *set his face to go to Jerusalem,*

For Jesus in Luke’s Gospel, this is a critical turning point-- this is the point of no return. Jesus knows that in saying “yes” to this journey towards Jerusalem, he is saying “no” to the lofty dreams and expectations of many of his best friends and followers; “no” to the scrupulous and exclusionary principles of his religious teachers, “no” to the oppressive political power and military might of the Roman Empire; he is saying “no” to the persistent temptations of the devil. It turns out that the Son of Man can’t be it all, do it all, or have it all any more than we can.

Jesus knows that in saying “yes” to this journey towards Jerusalem he is saying yes to suffering, yes to death, and YES to a vision of God and God’s Kingdom that has the power to turn the whole world upside down.

‘If I say ‘yes’ to this, to what am I saying ‘no’. And if I say ‘no’ to this, to what am I saying ‘yes.’

Jesus has set his face towards Jerusalem. In perfect freedom he has made his choice. He has chosen his “yes”. And he has chosen his “no”. And he knows exactly how much it will cost him. This is no easy thing. Even for Jesus. And having come to this point of clarity, this point of no return, Jesus has no time or patience left for anyone else’s excuses.

“I understand the cost, and I’ve made my choice,” Jesus says, “now it’s time for you to make yours.”

It sounds pretty harsh, because it is, but I believe there’s a gift within this ultimatum from Jesus:

In today’s Epistle Paul writes, *“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”*

In Jesus, God sets us free from the bondage of our own excuses--even our really good ones. God sets us free from our bondage to ambivalence and half-heartedness and unsatisfying compromises. God sets us free from our slavery to the exhausting lie that we CAN be it all, and do it all and have it all. God sets us free to make our choice, and follow Jesus on the Way that leads to Life.

I’m sure we can all think of at least a hundred valid responsibilities, at least two hundred valid cultural & religious expectations, at least three hundred valid family obligations, at least four hundred preferences, at least five hundred desires, and at least six hundred legitimate excuses that *could* keep us from saying a clear and decisive “yes” to following Jesus. They COULD. But the Good News is that they don’t HAVE to.

Jesus didn’t lie to his disciples, and I won’t lie to you.

There is a cost to saying “yes” to God. Because saying “yes” to God almost always means saying “no” to *something else*. And there is almost always *some* cost when we say “no” to our various responsibilities, expectations, obligations, preferences, and desires. For many of us, saying “yes” to God might cost us comfort or security, it might cost us approval or popularity, it might cost us prestige or privilege, patience or power or plans. And if it does, we’re probably getting off pretty easy. After all, saying “yes” to God cost Jesus (as it costs countless others) his LIFE.

In our lives, we are bombarded with choices--with opportunities, with demands, with expectations, with responsibilities, with desires...

As we struggle with our daily choices, we often feel stuck---caught between competing desires, pulled between competing demands.

Just remember: For freedom, Christ has set us free. Free from all our good *and bad* excuses. Free to say "Yes" to God and "No" to every lesser good.

Free to choose the Way of Life, even when it looks hard and costly, and we feel afraid. Free to follow Jesus wherever he leads...even into Jerusalem, to the Cross and Grave then into a new, Resurrected Life.

In the face of every choice that you face, I invite you to pause and ask yourself this question:

'If I say 'yes' to this, to what am I saying 'no'. And if I say 'no' to this, to what am I saying 'yes.'

**May our "yes" be to God,
to God's Call, to God's Promise,
to God's Kingdom, to God's Life
To God's Work, to God's Dream. Amen.**