

“The Practice of Saying No”

In early Christianity Easter was the one time of the year to baptize and welcome recent converts to the faith. Therefore, the time prior to Easter, the time we now identify as Lent, was devoted to training the new members of the faith, a kind of new members class, confirmation class and pre-baptismal counseling all rolled into one. It was a time of teaching and preparation, marked by intense indoctrination. But it is instructive to remember that for these earliest Christians faith was more than a set of beliefs and religious doctrines; it was a way of life that provided an alternate path to that of the dominant culture.

Therefore, more than learning a new religion, these converts were learning a new way to live. And so in their preparation to join the community of faith they were given tools to live out the Christian life as best they could in their own environment. These tools would have most certainly included practices like worship, prayer and fasting. They may have also included things like acts of compassion, service and humility and much more. All these tools were designed to help the new members of the community pay attention to God, learn about the faith and live it out in their daily lives. But in addition to Lent being a period of preparation for the community's newest members, it also served as an opportunity for the veteran members of the community of faith to rededicate themselves to the Christian way of life.

In the contemporary church talk about Christianity often centers on beliefs and doctrines. These are important and have their place, but by and large, we have

lost the sense that Christianity is a way of life that must be practiced. At several points throughout his letters Paul compares the life of discipleship to that of an athlete in training. Now whether or not you have participated in athletics, we all know that athletic ability is not sufficient in most sports. Athletes, if they are to maximize their potential, have to train their bodies and minds. Their training includes healthy living and diet. It also includes a lot of practice. Any coach worth his or her salt has at one time or another said something like, “If you don’t practice well, you won’t play well.”

This proverb is as true for the life of discipleship as it is for athletes in training. Even *if* faith comes naturally to us, there is benefit to be gained in practice. It fine tunes us. It helps us to pay attention to what is important. It reminds us of things we have taken for granted. It keeps us from stagnation; from making the mistake that we are done growing or changing. Just as an athlete must practice their sport in order to learn it, so must we, as disciples, practice the Christian way of life in order to learn it and live it out. But most of the time we go about it just the opposite way, don’t we? We want to understand its meaning before we consent to living it out. We want to believe before we agree to follow its prescriptions.

Lent can be a wonderful and powerful time for us to be reminded of the importance and benefit of practicing our faith; to be reminded of the tools our tradition offers for living out the Christian life; and it can also be a good time for us to be open to learning new tools so that we may continue our growth. After all, even though most of us would probably not qualify as new converts, newcomers to the faith, neither are we experts or finished products. Moreover, emphasis on practice

and experience over doctrine and belief is an important part of our faith that has been neglected for quite some time. As Marcus Borg writes, “within much of modern Western Christianity, faith came to be understood as ‘belief’ and was thus not about ‘doing.’ But if we take seriously that faith is not primarily about belief, but about [loving] God, then [it is important to recognize that] practice is how we [learn to love] God...An encouraging sign of renewal in the church in North America is the recovery of practice as central to the Christian life.”¹

In today’s Gospel lesson, Matthew’s account of Jesus’ temptation in the desert, there is mention of a number of standard Christian practices: prayer, fasting, and even the wilderness trek itself. However, there is mention of another practice, a practice that may be particularly fruitful for us as disciples in the 21st century: the practice of saying no. One commentator writes, “We learn from this story of Jesus’ testing, clues that instruct us about our own existence. Jesus’ persistence in understanding himself in terms of God’s grace, his patient trust, which *refuses* the presumptuous temptation to force God’s hand, his *undivided* commitment, which frees him to *reject* enticing alternatives—all become characteristics of faithful disciples. [Thus we] are invited to find in his experience an image of what it means to be faithful in [our] own lives.”²

Our lives are filled with many, many choices. Just think for a moment of how many choices you make every morning before your day officially begins. It is astounding how many options are presented to us in our day to day lives, isn’t it?

¹ *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: Harpers San Francisco, 2003), p. 188.

² Cousar, Charles B., *Texts for Preaching: Year A* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1995), p.190

We are so adept at making choices, that we don't even really think about most of them. We don't even recognize them as choices we have made. In a culture of abundance such as ours, we face more choices than we know. And while it may be true that most of the choices we face are not of the magnitude of Jesus' temptations, nonetheless they are all, in their own ways, opportunities for us to practice our faith, to pay attention to God and to learn to live in response to God's grace.

I recently read a wonderful column in *The Christian Century* by Barbara Brown Taylor. In it she writes about the spiritual practice of saying no. She offers several key components to the practice of saying no: including resistance, discernment, and something she calls ego-evacuation. "Resistance," she writes, "most often has to do with declining the blandishments of a consumer culture. No, I do not need another pair of shoes. No, I do not have to work seven days a week. Discernment involves understanding that I am rarely called to say no to overtly bad things...I am much more likely to be presented with choices between good things and better things, saying no to something as worthwhile as after-school tutoring in order to tend a friend who is dying. This is much harder than saying no to bad things, since declining an opportunity to do good means taking a cut in my sense of my own goodness," which brings her to ego-evacuation. She writes, "ego-evacuation...is not the same thing as self-denial. Whereas self-denial involves saying no to something that gives me pleasure, ego-evacuation involves saying no to all outsized versions of myself, including those bloated by my faith in my own

importance. Saying no whittles me down to size, giving me daily opportunities to remember who is God and who is not.”³

Our lives are so busy, aren't they? Have you ever stopped to wonder why that is, what it is that really compels us to stay so busy? Yes, we live in a time with many, many wonderful opportunities, where the choice we have is usually between good things and better things. But don't you wonder what suffers when we say "Yes" too often? And why it is that we feel compelled to say "Yes" so often? Are we afraid of taking a cut in our own sense of goodness and importance? What would our lives look like if, like Jesus, we realized that practicing our faith in God means remembering who is God and who (or what) is not; that it means saying "No" to all outsized versions of ourselves?

As we begin our Lenten journey, and as we embark on this new beginning together as pastor and congregation, I put this question before us: where is it in our lives, individually and communally, that we need to practice saying "No?" Another way to ask the same thing is what is it that is keeping us from more fully saying "Yes" to God?

In a world filled with so many choices and so much busyness, the practice of saying "No" just may be the thing we need to bring us closer to God and one another. As Taylor writes, "Learning to say no is how we clear space for a few carefully planted yeses to grow...[And] while saying yes may always be more satisfying than saying no, both are sacred words in the mouths of those who want

³ Brown Taylor, Barbara, "Getting to No," *The Christian Century*, September 18, 2007.

to get to God.” *Let us pray: God we thank you that through Jesus Christ you have said Yes to us, and No to all that separates us from you. Give us grace to see that in our lives which we need to resist in order to more closely follow the way you have placed before us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*