

Cornel Barnett
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 5:33-37, Matthew 11:16-19
Yes and No

We celebrated the Day of Pentecost on June 8 with the Holy Spirit's expression in different languages of the world and with a spirited introduction of our new hymnal. It was a big "yes" for the church as all Day of Pentecost celebrations are.

The following week I listened to a CD in my car on the way home and heard Dan Bern's song called "God Said No." I thought, "last week God said 'yes' and this week God says 'no'."

This had me thinking about the dynamic of saying, "yes and no" and recalling Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount read by Polly, "Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."

Jesus says this at a time when oaths and vows were proliferating in Judaism. He recommends that his disciples be honest and straightforward in their speech. A person's word should be capable of being trusted without any verbal ritual to give it validity. Perhaps oaths and vows led to manipulation, facilitation and equivocation, and seen as evil. It's difficult to know the exact reason of Jesus's concern.

Folk musician Dan Bern asks God in his song to take him back in time to prevent the suicide of a famous rock musician, to bump off Hitler, and to prevent Jesus from hanging on the cross. In each case, God says "no." If God took him back in time to the rock musician, he would ask for deals, if back to Hitler theories and discussions would distract him, and if he were on the road to Golgotha, he would just stare but not see, hear or speak. Bern seems to say that we cannot go back, we cannot Monday-morning quarterback, but we can act *now*.

Jesus states in the lectionary reading today, "...to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." (Matthew 11:16-19)

In other words, do not concern yourself with peripherals but do something positive now about whatever you face in life; and in deciding let your “yes be yes and your no be no.” Jesus discourages inaction and equivocation. This is easier said than done since there is no simple way of saying yes and no.

One can say “yes” and one can say “no” although “yes” seems to be the more popular approach to life. I proposed to Suellen and after she realized I was not joking, I was happy that she said an unequivocal “yes.” There is a magazine called “Yes!” run by the “Positive Futures Network.” Theirs is a “yes” to a peaceful, just and sustainable world.

Saying “no” can also be positive. Organizations in countries around the world help girls to say an unequivocal and assertive “no,” often loudly in public, to unsolicited advances. “Just Say No” is an effective campaign in this country for a variety of teen temptations. Therapist professor Gabe Maté wrote a book called *When Your Body Says No*. When one is unable to say “no” in life, the body says it in a variety of ways, mostly in illnesses. One heals with acknowledgement of what caused the illness and takes steps to overcome the cause.

On this July 4th weekend, it behooves us to affirm our democracy, which is largely based on saying yes and no. We vote with a yes or a no. Congressional votes and Supreme Court decisions conclude with “yes and no.” The Presbyterian Church makes decisions with a yes and no vote as experienced in landmark votes at the recent General Assembly in Detroit.

While saying “yes and no” can be positive aspects of navigating life, there are times when one regrets saying “no” when “yes” might have been the better option or vice versa. This afternoon I’m officiating a wedding in a home in Larkspur. The groom, Jim Meyer, sent me a collection of stories of his life in book form last week.

He tells a story about visiting a café-laden square in Cairo. A shoeshine man dogs his footsteps, imploring him to employ his services. Jim writes, “Business must not have been very good. Too many visitors have traded their oxfords for sneakers. My dirty leathers must have seemed a godsend to him. Had he not been so very insistent, I might have obliged him. Had I not inherited a deep layer of New England thrift, I might have relented. (After all, I reasoned that a new shine on my shoes would have lasted less than an hour in dusty Cairo). The man followed me for about five minutes, then was scared off by the security police who frequent tourist areas.

“That night I had difficulty sleeping. How many children at home depended on this man’s income, I wondered? Why hadn’t I made a few timely mental adjustments so that he could have earned some money, and at the same time maintained more of his dignity? I yearned for a second opportunity to erase the

image of an uncaring American, but our time in Egypt was almost over and that opportunity never came.”

Like much in life, we cannot do anything about the past but we can do something in every minute we’re given and about the future especially when we learn from the mistakes of the past. “Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

While “yes and no” said immediately and unequivocally is the best way to go, there are times when delaying a response is the best option and when the time is right one makes one’s choice and lives with it. About a year ago, in a general conversation with a friend on ethical matters, I was asked whether I would perform a wedding if requested by a gay couple. Since the Presbyterian Church (USA) constitution disallowed it, I refrained from an answer. I had never been asked to perform such a wedding and I didn’t want to respond to a general enquiry. An affirmative vote at last week’s General Assembly now allows pastor’s to perform same-gender weddings if they so choose. This is an inclusive church and you called the right pastor to minister in your midst.

There are still more aspects to saying yes and no. While one abstains from saying either “yes” or “no” the abstention itself is a yes or a no. In abstaining from voting one says yes to the victor and no to the other candidates.

Then there’s the sandwich theory where one says “no” but sandwiches it between two yeses. If one is asked to work on a Saturday to complete a work project, one can say, “yes, the work is important” and say “on Saturday I need to be with my daughter who is getting an award at school” and conclude with “I shall work late the next two evenings to complete the project.”

Finally, one might say “no” and it is taken as “yes.” Jim Meyer tells the story of visiting a Chilean boarding house. When he completed his meal, the host asked if he wanted more food. He said, “no, thanks” and was given a second helping. In order for his “no” to have effect, he needed to say an emphatic “no” and wag his index finger.

There are more scenarios of saying yes and no but I’ll end here.

Most decisions require discernment, prayer and thought but it is good in the final analysis to say an emphatic yes or no and live happily until the next decision, which seems to come minute by minute.