

What Do You Do?

Texts: Matthew 11:16-19, Romans 7:15-25a
Kirkpatrick Memorial Presbyterian Church – July 5, 2020
Rev. Michael F. Atzert

A pastor's confession – I had to get out of Genesis for a week. The texts we have looked at over the last few weeks have been some of the most challenging and confusing, and yet still inspiring. However, I needed a break from it for this Sunday. So, I chose this part of Paul's letter to the Romans which is one of the lectionary Scriptures for today. I am not sure my choice will be any less challenging or confusing than the previous few weeks, however.

David Lose, senior pastor at Mount Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, gives us some food for thought as we consider these words from Paul to the church at Rome this morning. "I remember watching as my then-toddling children first learned how difficult "no" is. "No, you can't run ahead of us into the street." "No, you can take that toy from your sister." "No, you can't play with the knobs on the stove." No. We don't like it because it is, well, just plain negative. Even more, it stands in our way, negating our immediate desires and wishes, withholding something from us that we want.

My children, now in middle school, still struggle with the word "no" --- as do, truth be told, their parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents, and, I'd wager, everyone in their larger human family. We want what we want for a reason, and "no" always runs contrary to those reasons, wants, and desires.

At the same time, as we mature we recognize the value of "no," not only for others but even for ourselves. By saying no to the extra helping of dinner we stay healthier. By saying no to television before studying for the exam we earn a better mark. By saying no to claiming the dubious tax exemption we retain a greater sense of honor and contribute to the public welfare.

The other side of freedom, we come to recognize, is responsibility, being able to say "no" that we can enjoy a greater "yes."

As practiced as we may become at "no," however, there is always the palpable tension between what we want in the moment and what we know is better for us. This is the struggle the Apostle Paul describes in today's reading, a struggle that is part and parcel of the human life” (From Internet. www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1526. 07-01-20).

“I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good...For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.” What is Paul talking about here?

Paul wants to do the right thing. Paul wants to make the right choices. However, doing the right thing and making the right choices is tough. It is difficult. At times, it is impossible. And Paul knows it. He has spent the majority of his life under the Law – the Torah. If you remember, he is well-versed and well-respected for his knowledge of God’s Law. Then, though, he met Jesus on the Road to Damascus, and this idea of grace comes into his life. And reconciling the freedom of grace with the responsibility of adhering to God’s Law is an inner struggle for him. Paul is a sinner. Paul has not been perfect. “For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work in me.” For him, he has a choice to make – a “no” to say to sin and a “yes” to say to putting his trust and faith in the grace of Jesus Christ as his Savior.

We are living in such difficult times. You do not have to look around far to see some of the worst of our society – the worst of humanity. We have lost our ability to honor and respect one another, even if we may disagree on certain topics. You have fights and harsh words erupting over wearing masks during this pandemic. On social media, I just cannot even right now. There is no regard for hearing others and engaging in conversation with one another. The volume of the words just keeps getting louder, and we stop listening.

In some respects, I can understand it. After four months of self-isolation and quarantine, we are all tired. We all long – desperately – for some normalcy in our lives. So maybe that is why we are quicker to lose our patience with the checkout person at the grocery store, the person in front of us in the fast food drive through line who is taking way too long to place their order, and that person who will or will not wear their mask the right way. We are done. “For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.” And we get stuck. We resort to those vices and temptations that are not good for us. How do we say no to those harmful ways in our lives, especially during these times of extreme stress and anxiety?

For Paul and for us, it comes down to verse 25. “Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” The only out we have to do what we want to do – what we should do – is through Jesus Christ. When we are tempted, we need to reach out to Jesus. When we feel ourselves going over the edge of the cliff, we need to cry out for Jesus to rescue us. When the anxiety of these days becomes too much for us, we offer our thanks to God who delivers us from our stress, our anxiety and yes, our sin, through Jesus Christ. What Christ did on the cross for us saves us from our sins. It restores the relationship between us and God. And opens us up for an amazing and joy-filled life with God at the helm.

Will we still sin and struggle? Sure, we will. That is because we are human – we are not perfect. We are still prone to sin. However, the unconditional love and grace of our God through Christ promise us forgiveness and mercy no matter what. And it will allow us the chance to be successful in doing the good we want to do. Or as Roger read in the first reading from the Gospel of Matthew, “Wisdom is proved right by her deeds.” When we have the wisdom of God – and the grace of Jesus Christ – we are naturally drawn to the good – to lives of service – to being in tune with God’s will for our lives. We are drawn to saying “no” to the evil we are tempted to do and saying “yes” to the good God has instilled in us.

I love how David Lose ended the article that I read for this sermon. He writes, “In this case, it may be helpful to remind our people that, according to Paul, saying ‘no’ is difficult, runs against our nature, and requires help. But saying ‘no’ is also requisite to saying ‘yes.’ You can’t, that is, say ‘yes’ to being in relationship with one person without saying ‘no’ to all others. You can’t say ‘yes’ to one dream without saying ‘no’ to some others. We will not, of course, solve any of these problems perfectly, but we will be better for trying, and, even when we fail, we are invited back to the mercy and grace of God who stands ready to love, forgive and encourage us in this life and the next” From Internet. www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1526. 07/01/20).

What do you do? Say yes to the mercy of your Creator who stands ready to love, forgive and encourage you – today and for all eternity. Let us pray...

Gracious and loving God, we want to do good. We want to live lives that reflect Your goodness and faithfulness. But we also know how impossible that is. Sin is a part of each of our lives, and that sin runs rampant when we are not connected to Christ. Help us, we pray, to look to You for rescue and restoration. Guide us toward those good things of life – that bring You honor and praise. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.