

Saying Yes and Saying No

Mark 4:1-8, 13-20 Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

The other day I felt kind of like an English nobleman; here on the beautiful grounds of Mount Zion. I found myself walking across the beautiful church grounds to our woods south of the community cemetery where we hope to do some retirement housing soon. I was dressed the part. A wealthy friend of mine who is literally a big game hunter had given me a hand me down hunting coat, made in England. I had on my favorite, plain looking boots and had put

on one of those British hats that snaps down in the front. But wait...there's more! I also had with me a new friend.

Right at New Year's we adopted a new dog, an 8 year old Brittany Spaniel named Sam. Sam and his breed are gun dogs; bird dogs. And on this day, I brought Sam to God's property called Mount Zion. As I strode across the land, wearing my British cap and hunting coat, watching my beautiful bird dog, quarter and point, I felt like an English gentleman; which is not bad for a Mississippi redneck!

Sam works areas about 50 to 75 yards out. He hunts with joy and abandon, until he scents a bird and freezes in a classic point. Its fun to watch him bound into anything...except thorns. I have another wooded area I like to take Sam to and it's amazing how smart he seems to be. There's one area there, off a dirt, country road, that is half the size of this sanctuary in thorns and he won't go there; any other kind of brush and he'll leap right in, but he must know from past experience, that thorns hurt and scratch, getting tangled in his coat maybe to the point of halting any progress.

Maybe that's why Jesus used thorns in our passage today as the image of the "*cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word,*" that is, the living of the Word by us. Now remember, Jesus was an outdoorsman; he had no choice. Other than a ride on a donkey Palm Sunday, Jesus would have walked everywhere. He would have known how thorns scratch, hurt and halt moving forward and therefore could easily relate "*the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for*

other things” to thorns; the cares of the world stop us from growing; albeit subtly and seductively for the cares of the world often seem so important because they keep us so busy and they are almost always somewhat good; not the best, but somewhat good. And then, before we know it, we’re ensnared in the mundane and life as the Lord wants it lived seems only a faint memory or an occasionally stated aspiration. I’ve been halted in growth by busy-ness haven’t you?

And that’s why, every day since Sam came our way, I’ve been blessed to walk, my favorite form of exercise. You see, Sam has to walk or pent up energy will erupt into poor behavior. And I have to walk, to clear my mind, do some praying, thinking and to get exercise. If I don’t, I lose fitness and focus. I know because until Sam came, I’d dropped out of my habit of walking daily. My favorite walking companion, another dog, a King Charles Cavalier Spaniel, began to give into his congenital heart defect last summer and died about 6 months ago in busy-ness and grief over Blaze, I just stopped walking.

All of which leads me in a roundabout way to our Christian practice today: Asceticism. Let me see if I can simplify the meaning of this word we don’t hear much about. Its roots help in the definition; it’s from the Greek language, *akesis*, meaning to exercise. For our sermon series on Christian practices, Christian asceticism means disciplined, daily, spiritual exercises. Now all of this in essence means saying no to some things and yes to others. And, as in things of the body, what we say yes to and what we say no to, in a disciplined fashion has consequences. Saying yes to healthy foods, proper

exercise and positive attitudes lend themselves to physical health. The corollaries are all true as well; saying yes to the ways of health means saying no to lack of exercise, unhealthy eating habits and negative attitudes. In terms of our health, what we say yes to and no to can determine our tomorrows; our yeses and noes have consequences. So it is with things of the Spirit. To say no to the things of the world and yes to the ways of the Spirit, in a discipline fashion is what Christian ascetism is all about.

Our brother and sister church members studying along with this sermon series received three suggestions from this chapter's author, Catholic laywoman and theology professor at Marquette, Shawn Copeland. We'll briefly touch on the practices Dr. Copeland suggests and I'll offer my spin on them as ways from us, to continue growth in Christ and not be ensnared by the thorns of worldly cares.

First, Dr. Copeland suggests we can strengthen our “yes” to the ways of the Lord and our “No” to the thorny snares of the world through prayer. Prayer is defined as: “intimate conversation with God-real, demanding, loving, and engaged conversation between a real person and the real, living God” (Practicing Our Faith, pg 68). There is no right language or style for prayer – it is you, in your style of conversation and communication, sharing with God. And when we humans do that, it changes us by God's hand in ways that are always loving towards us. In the Practicing our Faith book, several suggestions are offered:

- a. Choose a time for daily prayer; keep the time even if it has to be put in an appointment book.
- b. Find a space where you'll not be disturbed. Perhaps a cross, picture or scripture reading to start will help; be moderately comfortable
- c. Five or six deep breaths help some.
- d. Focus on God's presence and speak words of love and prayer, joy and thanksgiving to God; pray for the afflicted in the world, near and far, ask for compassion, love, mercy and justice; as personal cares or joys surface, place them before God and seek His will.
- e. If distracted do cling or try to control the distractions; as calmly as possible return to conversation with God.
- f. Spend some minutes in quiet seeking the Lord's will and the stirrings of your heart
- g. Close with thanks

That's what book that goes with this series says. Let me offer a couple of quick spins you might all know. One is the acronym ACTS. A is adoration, speak your love and praise of and to God. C is confession, to adore God and God's perfection and power helps us realize our on faults and sins, confess and seek forgiveness. T is thanksgiving, the only thing people can give God that God doesn't already own is thanks. S is supplication, ask God to help others and yourself.

The second spin or help on prayer is this: hold your hand in front of you with your thumb pointing at yourself. Each finger stands as a prayer

reminder. The thumb is closest to you; maybe even pointing at your heart – pray for those closest to you; your friends and family. The index finger is the one we use for accusing; it is a reminder that Jesus said to pray for enemies and those who persecute, ask for His peace and reconciliation; do this for your personal and our corporate enemies so that His peace may rule in our lives and the world. The tallest finger is a reminder that Paul teaches in I Timothy 2:2 to pray for leaders. The finger next to the pinky is the weakest finger; pray for the sick, the homeless, the hungry, and the lost. The last and smallest finger is a reminder to pray for yourself.

Prayer strengthens us to say yes to the Lord and no to the ensnaring thorny ways of the world.

Next, we can strengthen our “yes” to the ways of the Lord and our “No” to the thorny snares of the world through examination of our conscience. Dr. Copeland says that examination of the conscience “provides a structure for deliberate reflection on the dailey choices and decisions we have actually made. Some Christians carry this out during their daily prayer time...asking some hare questions: how do things stand between me and God? Where and how is my life growing? Whao and what am I becoming? To what am I really saying yes with my life? Are my noes life affirming ones?”

(Practicing our Faith pp 69-70).

To engage in self examination of this sort is right down our alley as Methodists. Let me share with you some of the questions John Wesley shared over two hundred years ago:

1. *Am I creating the impression that I am better than I am?*
2. *Am I honest in all my acts and words?*
3. *Do I break confidence -- tell others' secrets?*
4. *Am I a slave to dress, friends, work, habits?*
5. *Can I be trusted?*
6. *Am I self-conscious, self-pitying, or self-justifying?*
7. *Did God's Word live in me today?*
8. *Am I enjoying my prayer time?*
9. *When was the last time I shared my faith?*
10. *Do I pray about the money I spend?*
11. *Do I go to bed on time and get up on time?*
12. *Do I disobey God in anything?*
13. *Do I have an uneasy conscience?*
14. *Am I defeated in any part of my life?*
15. *Am I jealous, impure, critical, touchy, irritable, or distrustful?*
16. *Am I proud?*
17. *How do I spend my spare time?*
18. *Do I thank God that I am not like others?*
19. *Is there anyone I fear, dislike, disown, criticize, disregard or resent?*
20. *Do I grumble and complain?*
21. *Is Christ real to me?*

Examination of our conscience can strengthen our yeses to the Lord and no to worldiness.

Finally, we can strengthen our “yes” to the ways of the Lord and our “No” to the thorny snares of the world through faith-sharing groups.

Have you ever noticed that Jesus carried out His ministry from the setting of a group of twelve? There is a key to abundant life here. A small group, of about a dozen folks, gathering for group prayer, mutual support, faith-sharing and even accountability, provides the support and challenge we need to examine and strengthen our lives with God. Again, this way of saying yes to the Lord and no to worldliness is so in alignment with who we are as Methodists. You see, the Methodist movement started out as a small group movement within the Church of England. John Wesley set up what he first called “bands” and later called class-meetings, solely for the purpose of growth in Christ. Dr. Alex Tang describes well how we used to look: mainly small group meetings of 6-8 persons. They would meet weekly at regular places. Attendance was monitored and there were certain stringent requirements to be part of the group.

They were expected to attend most of the meetings, do the regular Bible reading and family prayers, work regularly among the poor and tithe to their churches. An important point of this class meetings were the self-reflection to be done before and during the meeting. This is not a private affair that is so common among our culture but these self-reflections will be discussed among the group. Members hold each other responsible and accountable. To achieve that John Wesley developed a series of questions to be answered prayerfully during their personal devotional life and these questions will then be answered truthfully to all members of the class.

Any failure will be immediately acted upon and prayed for. It was this element of

accountability that made these small groups such a powerful instrument in the development of people in the faith.

The following self-reflection questions were to be asked and answered at every class meeting:

Have you the forgiveness of your sins? Have you peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ? Have you the witness of God's Spirit with your spirit, that you are a child of God? Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart? Has no sin, inward or outward, dominion over you? Do you desire to be told of your fault? Do you desire to be told of all your faults, and be told plain and to the point? Do you desire that every one of us should tell you from time to time, whatsoever is in his heart concerning you?

Can you imagine how a meeting such as this, with Jesus present in the form or “2 or more gathered in His name” would shape a life? Perhaps what the world needs now is a revitalized Christianity through such groups helping us to say yes to the Lord and no to worldliness in faith sharing small groups.

Well the bottom line we preachers sometimes receive is: ok, preacher that well and good but give me something practical. Ok. On the last Wednesday of this month at 7 p.m. Pastor Jill is starting a new group, call or email her at the church office. If there are too many, we'll find somebody who will host a different group. Or, maybe you're willing to open your home, in your neighborhood. Call one of the preachers if this is the case and we'll help you get going.

In Deuteronomy 30:19 we hear God's desire for our choices in life: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”

There are thorny, ensnaring issues and temptations all around us seeking to sidetrack us from living life abundant. Prayer, self examination and starting with a dedicated faith-sharing group are all ways to the end of reaching this life abundant, together in the practice of Christian asceticism.

Let us pray.