

## **PRACTICING OUR FAITH: LEARN TO SAY NO (AND TO SAY YES!)**

Among the highlights of the memorable weekend we spent with Dr. James Forbes last December, this one may be the most vivid for me: it was at this very point in the Sunday morning service, just as Dr. Forbes was about to launch into his sermon. He stood in this pulpit and led us in a song, a simple melody with even simpler words. I don't remember the melody, but who could forget the words?: "Yes... yes... yes..." And what I remember also is this congregation, which prides itself on its musical sophistication, singing along with him, faces with rapt expressions and bigger smiles than Palestrina could boast: "Yes... yes... yes..."

There is power in an affirmation like that, in spite of its simplicity (or is it *because* of its simplicity?). I'm not sure that in that moment any of us knew what we were saying Yes *to*, but it seems that we all long to affirm something, finally, in the end, to utter a word of unambiguous affirmation.

My friend Alan Johnson, a United Church of Christ pastor, was once asked to summarize the Christian gospel. He thought about that for minute and then replied, "Well, I think I can summarize the gospel in a single word. And the word is, 'Yes.'"

The more I have thought about Alan's reply, the more I think he had it right. The gospel is about God's Yes to us, first through creation ("Yes, it *is* good."), then through covenant ("Yes, I will walk with you. I will be your God, and you will be my people.") and then through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus ("Yes, I have come that you may have joy and that your joy may be complete. Yes, I am with you to the close of the age.").

Or, as Paul put it in his letter to the church in Corinth, Jesus Christ is an eternal Yes, "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him." And, of course, it is in response to God's great Yes that we are invited to offer our own Yes, our own offerings of praise and devotion, our own Yes-shaped lives.

So the Christian gospel may be summarized by the word Yes. But implied within that word of affirmation there is another word. And the word is No. The gospel is not only Yes, it is also No. It is a Yes to some things but a No to other things. There is affirmation (Yes) but there is also denial (No). So one of the Christian practices is learning how and when to say Yes and, conversely, how and when to say No.

Sometimes we are called upon to say No to something within ourselves and sometimes we are called upon to say No to something that is external to ourselves. Most often, however, the two are closely inter-related.

For instance, let's consider the custom of giving up something for Lent. It derives from the tradition of Lent being a time of fasting. It is a spiritual discipline that is a reminder of the sacrifice of Christ and a reminder that discipleship comes at a cost. If, during Lent, many believers couldn't give up eating for significant periods of time, they were encouraged to give up *something*. I remember hearing about the son and his father who decided together to give up something for Lent, something that each one loves. The son gave up candy for Lent and the father gave up drinking. When the son found his father drinking a glass of wine, his son reminded him of his pledge. The father said, "Well, son, I gave up hard liquor." To which the son replied, "O.K. then, I give up hard candy."

I did not grow up with the practice of giving up something for Lent, but I have come to see that there is value in the custom. We are so used to having what we want that we have developed a sense of entitlement around our own desires. To deny ourselves something, to say No, even to something small like candy or liquor, is in some way to pronounce our freedom from the tyranny of our own desires.

And that is not just denying ourselves. It is also a way of saying No to a commercial culture that, in order to continue to feed off of us, must continue to blur the distinction between our wants and our needs. To deny ourselves even something small, is a small way to be in rebellion against a culture that tells us in a thousand ways that we can have anything we want and we are supposed to want anything we can have. Learning how to say No is so difficult, and most of us have so little practice at it, that perhaps it is best to start with something small. So it may be okay to start with candy, or even just hard candy, and move on from there.

I have a friend who is baffled and somewhat concerned about her daughter's sex life. Her daughter is in her early twenties and unmarried, but she has had an active social life and a number of steady boyfriends along the way. As mother and daughter they are quite open with one another on the subject of sex but, as much as she has tried, my friend can't relate fully to her daughter's attitudes on the matter. My friend has concluded that it must be a generational thing. It seems that my friend's daughter has concluded—and she is brazenly open about this—that she doesn't want to have sexual relations with anyone until she is married.

My friend laughs when she tells the story now. She says that one day her daughter said, "Mom, your generation was concerned about sexual freedom. Well, I'm exercising my freedom to say No." Now that is not just self-denial. In our sex-saturated culture, filled as it is with presumptuous expectations in regard to sex, that young woman's convictions are a form of rebellion. By her actions she is, in some way, saying No to the whole oppressive dominant culture we live under in these days. It is no small thing.

**William Willimon, who is the Dean of Duke University Chapel, tells about the time that he met with a group of Christian students who were eager to know about his attitudes toward premarital sex. They asked, in so many words, if premarital sex is really such a big deal. Will says that he thought for a moment and then replied, “Well, I’ll admit that, in the scheme of things, it’s not the most important ethical issue you’ll face. But it will give you some good practice in saying No. We figure that if you can say No to something like sex, then maybe you’ll be better prepared to say No when you are asked to sacrifice your integrity for some corporation’s profits or when you are asked to fight in some unjust war. It takes practice to learn how to say No. Sex seems as good a place as any to start.” Whatever you think of Willimon’s response, at least can we agree that there is something considerable at stake in our ability and willingness to say No—in large matters, and even in small ones?**

**At first, saying No usually looks like a form of self-denial. And often it is only later that we can see that the No is really the key to freedom. For instance, when my mother was a girl her family kept the Sabbath quite strictly. In accordance with the biblical mandate, they would observe Sunday as a day of rest. My grandmother would bake bread on Saturday to be served with warm milk the next day—their traditional Sunday meal—so that she would not have to cook on the Sabbath. When Sunday arrived, the children would not do their normal chores. The Sunday newspaper was kept on the top shelf of the china cabinet until Monday morning. They couldn’t talk on the telephone and they weren’t allowed to play any games, either.**

**As a boy, I remember thinking that it sounded awful. My mother would say, “Well, actually, that was my favorite day of the week. After church in the morning, we would spend the day together. It was a busy family, so it was nice to have a day when you could eat dinner together without being so rushed, take walks and catch up with each other. Or we could spend time with friends.”**

**I am not sure that her description converted me when I was a boy. But I’ve got to say that now it sounds quite wonderful, less like a religious obligation, a form of self-denial, and more like a gift.**

**Let’s see: you don’t have to work, you don’t have to cook, you don’t have to answer the phone. You just have to praise God and enjoy the day with people you love. As a character in one of the Disney movies put it, “If this is torture, chain me to the wall!” What sounded like self-denial, an onerous No, when I was a boy, now sounds more like freedom, more like a gift.**

**It is not insignificant that the Sabbath was established when the Jews were in exile. Their Babylonian captors wanted to get as much as possible from the Hebrew slaves. So they tried to make them work every day. But the Jews rebelled and insisted that one day a week they would refrain from working so that they could worship their God. In short, they said, “No. We are good for more than labor. We are made in the image of God. This is the God who rules over us all, Jew and Babylonian. Call us slaves if you will, but one day a week we will remind ourselves that we are precious in the sight of the one true God.” Somehow the**

Babylonians knew that this was a form of rebellion that could not be crushed. And so they relented. One day a week they did not expect the Jews to work and allowed them to worship.

That was a different time and a different place, but I wonder how different it is from our circumstance. In our culture, where getting and spending have been elevated to something like civic duties, to cease working or shopping for a single day is, in itself, a form of rebellion. Perhaps we need to rediscover our tradition's ways of saying No. We are good for more than labor. We are more than workers and consumers to be judged in the culture by dollars made and dollars spent. Perhaps we need one day a week to remind ourselves--and to remind the oppressive dominant culture--that we were made for more than this. To say No, even for a day, sounds less like self-denial and more like freedom.

Similarly, I would like to foment a rebellion this next Christmas. This Christmas I would like to see if we might discover or rediscover the exhilarating freedom of saying No. I have in mind saying No to the forces in our culture that have all but stolen Christmas from us. I mean the ones who somehow have duped us into thinking that the joy of the season is found in buying things we don't need with money we don't have.

Bill McKibben, who for several years has been writing in service to this gathering rebellion, writes, "It is abundantly clear who the "grinches" of our culture are, [those who are threatening to take steal Christmas from us. They are] those relentless commercial forces who have spent more than a century trying to convince us that Christmas does come from a store, or a catalog, or a virtual mall on the Internet. Every day, but especially in the fall, they try their hardest to turn each Cindy Lou Who into a proper American consumer--try their best to make sure her Christmas revolves around Sony or Sega, Barbie or Elmo."

McKibben goes on to mourn what had happened to Christmas in his own life. He writes, "Christmas had become something to endure at least as much as it had become something to enjoy--something to dread at least as much as something to look forward to. Instead of an island of peace amid a busy life, it was an island of bustle. The people we were talking to wanted so much more out of Christmas: more music, more companionship, more contemplation, more time outdoors, more love. And they realized that to get it, they needed less of some other things: not so many gifts, not so many obligatory parties, not so much hustle." Can you hear the No in that? Can you hear the Yes?

I like McKibben's approach, however, because he makes clear that in rebelling against the Grinch it is not enough to play the grouch. If there is a No to be said to the ways we have come to celebrate Christmas, it is in order to rediscover the powerful yet largely smothered Yes that is still in the season. After he identifies the misplaced focus of the season, he goes on to suggest alternatives that are appealing and winsome. Rather than merely suggesting ways to strip Christmas of its commercial dross, he presents an alternative vision that might take its place. His prescriptions are more like a refreshing tonic than cod liver oil. He tells about one family that each year passes around the same garish necktie. He describes the year he learned how to make the best spicy chicken sausage on the planet so that he could give it to his friends, and the uncle who gave his nephew a certificate for a trip to the zoo. To me it sounds like self-

denial and more like freedom. Saying No is not always this much fun, yet in a culture such as ours I do not think it is an insignificant rebellion.

What do you think? Could we begin now to share creative ideas with one another about how we might reclaim Christmas so that, when the season comes, something beautiful, fragrant and appealing might grow among us? It might seem strange to talk about this in the middle of Lent, but in December it will be too late. By then the modern day grinch already will have us in their grip. The rebellion would need to start soon so that when December comes we can simply revel in the wondrous Yes of the season.

Here as elsewhere, it is not simply that we must learn how to say No to some things and Yes to other things. The two are more closely related than that. It is like they are two steps of the same dance. The No is implied by the Yes. The No frees us to say Yes. We say No as a form of Christian practice so that, finally, in the end, our lives might sing a word of affirmation: Yes, yes, yes!