

Yes and No

Matthew 5:33-37

Today, we celebrate our teenagers, who said “yes” to a disciplined, spiritual engagement with God and with the Church in confirmation. Today we also celebrate eight members of this congregation who, when the community affirmed their spiritual gifts for ordained ministry, said “yes”. On this day, I want to wonder what it means to say this extraordinarily powerful word: “yes.”

Let’s first go to Jesus and see what he has to say on the word, “yes.” I will read from Matthew’s gospel, chapter 5, the Sermon on the Mount. This translation is going to use the word “swear,” but here Jesus does not mean the kind of swearing that makes your mother ground you. It’s about swearing a loyalty oath--like you might do in Scouts, or in an organization, or to your country.

‘...you have heard that it was said in ancient times, “You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.” But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven... or by the earth, ... or by Jerusalem... and do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be “Yes” or “No”; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

This is not the sexiest of Jesus’ teachings. This is from the Sermon on the Mount and there’s lots of other stuff in there that we focus on before this text, like: “love your enemy,” “don’t judge, lest ye be judged.” This passage may sound a little strange and out of date. Do any of us really have to worry about swearing oaths?

If you look more closely here, I hope you see that this is a word to us about the importance of our words. Specifically, Jesus is asking you: “do your words truly align with your actions.” He’s saying, “Don’t be careless with what you say “yes” to in this life.” Say yes and back it up with the substance of your life. Say no and mean that no. Your word matters.

This idea touches all of us, not only every day of our lives, but maybe even every hour, every minute. All of the time, you are saying “yes” to some things and “no” to others. How often do you think about these decisions? Are you conscious of your “yesses” and your “nos?”

There is, inside all of us, a quiet inner place we call our conscience. It is the place where you weigh competing impulses where you figure out how to live a life that is “good.”

That’s where this word from Jesus becomes electric. He’s poking around at your conscience. He’s asking, “Is this thing on? Is this thing working?”

I was at a wonderful conference this week for clergy who want to clarify our commitment to stopping climate change. In a small group, the leader invited us to name the things we do to show we care for the earth. I started to make a list... I garden, I recycle, I buy used stuff, we have energy saving appliances... but as I started to name these things that I thought might be in the “plus” column, my mind kept moving somewhere else--it was racing to the things I

do that are almost certainly in the “minus” column: I have a 2900 square foot house that I heat and cool, I love hot showers, I fly whenever I want to, I have 3 cars, I eat meat...

Here I am at this conference. I clearly want to believe I’m saying “yes” to loving God’s creation... but my actions might be saying “no.” Anyone know what I’m talking about?

We are susceptible to self-delusion. I think I love my neighbors--I want to love my neighbors--as myself, but do I? I think I love God more than wealth... but do I? I think I love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength... but do I? I want to follow Jesus... but am I? is my “yes” really a “yes?”

All of us--no matter what age we are--are shaped by our culture. And our culture doesn’t lead us in the way of love or justice or Jesus. Another way of saying this is that there are forces--“systems” and “structures” if you want to use that language--that want you to live a life according to *their* ideals. Capitalism has its own norms--it tells us to consume, dispose, externalize the costs, value profit above all. These norms are incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The United States has norms--love your country and believe in its unflagging virtue--and those are not gospel norms. Our political parties have norms--our side is always right, the other side is always wrong--and those are not gospel norms. The white race has historically had norms and they are not gospel norms. Your class has norms and they are not gospel norms. Your family has norms and they may not be gospel norms. Here's the real kicker: our church has norms--behaviors and attitudes and priorities that we’ve said are just part of being the church--and not all of these are gospel norms.

Our world isn’t benign. Ours is a world of powers and principalities. It’s a world of forces that might tell you you are something *other than* a Beloved Child of God. It’s a world that tells you to love native born over foreign born. It’s a world that tells you to seek your own self-interest instead of the common good. These these powers and principalities have agendas that are not rooted in love ethic of Jesus Christ. This very same dynamic was true in Jesus’ time. Jesus was born and lived in world dominated by the Roman empire. The Roman empire had established its norms everywhere.

Jesus had to re-teach people how to be children of God. He had to re-teach us at the level of our conscience, how to know when to say “yes” and when to say “no.”

This is still what all of us who follow Jesus are called to do. To develop our consciences. To listen to the inner voice. To find strength when the world tells us one thing but our inner voice is telling us something else. This is one of the most powerful and beautiful things that happens in confirmation. You see this when you read our confirmand’s faith statements. Because in these statements you see how they are exercising their power to say yes and no.

- Elsa Cayce says “yes” to beauty, gratitude, and forgiveness, and “no” to a life that reduces complexity.

- James Leonard says “yes” to science and critical thinking, and “no” to violence, especially the violence that comes from different beliefs.
- Stella Love says “yes” to the mystery of God and “no” to the idea that life can be good without service to others.
- Jack Bowen says “yes” God in the Trinity even as he creatively interprets how those 3 parts of God are expressed, while saying “no” to the use of Scripture as a weapon.
- Mary Louise Cromwell says “yes” to finding God in her own lived experience--even in the experience of struggle and “no” to a God who is only found in the good times.
- Walker Mosely says “yes” to a God is everywhere and in everything and “yes” to being a disciple of Jesus, which is a “no” to a life this not full of kindness and caring for others.
- Margaret Waltemath Lewicki says “yes” to church as a verb, a life in community with others, and “no” to the idea that our wholeness can be found in isolation from each other.
- Jackson Snyder says “yes” to faith as a dynamic search, and “yes” to God as a mystic unity, and “no” to a God as a magical grantor of wishes.
- Ezra Morrison says “yes” to the ethic of love and care for the whole creation--and “no” to a world in which humans are superior other forms of life.

There is something within each of us that vibrates with God. The image of God, the capacity to discern God’s will, the capacity to discover your union with the Spirit of the Universe and with every other living thing, is in each of you, in your conscience.

It is the part of you, that through the Holy Spirit, can know and do what is good.

Your conscience is also one of the most contested places in the world. Even now there are principalities and powers who would love to win your conscience for their cause.

Keep listening to Jesus, whose conscience was clearer than anyone before or since. Listen to the voice of love. Act in good faith. Let your yes be a yes and your no be a no.