

**“Saying Yes and Saying No”**

**Luke 4:1-13**

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**1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent**

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It would be easier to resist the devil if he wasn't so helpful. The devil in this story is the only one to come and help Jesus in the wilderness. Mark's Gospel says that the angels waited on him. But there's no room service in Luke. Jesus, led by the Spirit, is on his own. The devil sees legitimate need in Jesus and he goes to him. I'd call that a deacon, not a devil. Would you have said no?

The devil picks up on three needs that he sees in Jesus, needs that are particularly transparent in this wilderness place: a need to survive, a need for power, and a need for recognition. Three *legitimate needs*. I say legitimate because every human being needs a certain level of these three things to thrive. Food for survival is the most literal need of the three. Obviously, we have to have food and water to survive. The devil saw this in Jesus. He was hungry, famished, quite possibly near the edge of death. Food for survival is a legitimate need.

But power and recognition are just as important. Power has unfortunate negative connotations, especially in the English language. The Spanish is more helpful here where the verb that means “to be able” to do something - is the same word that translates in its noun form as “power.” Power is the ability to act. And every human being needs a basic level of power to survive and thrive. The devil sees this in Jesus and takes him up to a high place where he can look out across the world. Wouldn't it be a good thing to be able to act on the world instead of having the world acting on you?

And finally recognition. We all hope to be recognized for some contribution – however small or large – some acknowledgement of our presence, our impact, our meaning in the world. The devil saw this in Jesus – test God's recognition for you so you can be acknowledged, recognized, and revealed to the world.

It's important to recognize these needs as legitimate, since too often in church we speak about resisting temptation only as a matter of rejecting things that we desire that actually aren't good for us. These are also temptations, especially for people living amongst excess. But Jesus needs these three things to thrive, possibly even to survive.

I don't think that Jesus says no to bread, to power, or recognition, per se. These are all things that he will accept and sometimes even promote – in parables about banquets, and dinners with all sorts of characters, and at the last supper – bread is good. Jesus receives the power of the Holy Spirit and with it he heals, casts out demons, preaches, and teaches and after his death tells his disciples that they should wait to receive power from the Holy Spirit. Last week Jesus was transfigured receiving recognition from God and his closest disciples. When he rides into Jerusalem on that donkey he is quite intentionally promoting his own recognition as a different kind of leader, a different kind of king. And his resurrection will give him the ultimate recognition – the one who was raised from the dead. No I don't think

Jesus rejects bread, and power, and recognition because they are not legitimate desires or needs. No. I think Jesus rejects the devil's offering because of the allegiance that the devil demands.

This is an important distinction since some of us have been taught by the church that these needs aren't legitimate. Jesus will find a way for these needs to be met. It's just that he will be careful about the source of his supply. Saying no to the devil is not the same as saying no to the need. It's a way of saying yes to God – yes to God's provision, yes to God's power, yes to God's calling and the recognition that comes with it.

I've been thinking a lot about saying no to some legitimate needs as a way of saying yes to God. I've been thinking a lot about it partly because I am very bad at saying no to legitimate needs – my own and those of others, but also because many of you are bad at it too. There are too many of us who work too many hours, take on too many responsibilities, trying to change too many things not because we are innately arrogant or self-centered but because the needs that we encounter in the world are legitimate. And many of us have been given extraordinary gifts – talents, education, emotional intelligence, resources precisely to address these needs - many of us see our calling as directly connected to addressing these needs.

Yet not everything can be improved by working harder including the culture of despair that infects our world as evidenced by all sort of markers – from death by suicide or overdoses at their highest rates in half a century, to higher levels of anxiety making life more difficult for many, to the ongoing political divisions and dislocations. This culture points to a sickness that cannot necessarily be addressed with more work. In fact, a culture of more control – the one offered in this story by the devil - is partly to blame for some of the sickness.

Henry Nouwen says it this way: "While efficiency and control are the great aspirations of our society, the loneliness, isolation, lack of friendship and intimacy, broken relationships, boredom, feelings of emptiness and depression, and a deep sense of uselessness fill the hearts of millions of people in our success-oriented world. . .the cry that arises," Nouwen says, "is clearly: Is there anybody who loves me? Is there anybody who really cares? Is there anybody who wants to be with me when I am not in control, when I feel like crying? Is there anybody who can hold me and give me a sense of belonging?"<sup>1</sup>

The conundrum for the church is that we cannot give anyone that sense of belonging simply as a program, piled on top of everything else. Love can't be programmed for an hour each week sitting in a sanctuary. Deep belonging isn't something you can get by signing up for church like you do a soccer team, or a yoga class. We have to learn to say no to some things in order to say yes to this one big thing that God wants to give us. We have to learn to relax our habits of control in order to receive a gift that can only be given.

I learned this again while in Cuba with our church's delegation a few weeks ago. I'm still trying to figure out what happened to me in Cuba that brought me back less restrained and more relaxed than I'm accustomed to – at least temporarily. I'm

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<sup>1</sup> Henry J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, (USA: Crossroad Publishing), 1989, 33-34.

sure a big part of it was being whisked off the moving sidewalk of life which is what happens when you enter a country where your cell phone has no coverage and those constant notifications aren't disrupting your attention.

But another part of it was the dancing. Dance seemed to break out everywhere we went. When our guests invited us to take a peek inside the first gay dance club in Cuba, a spontaneous dance party broke out and every member of the church and our delegation participated. At the Encuentro – the meeting between our Presbytery and the Central Presbytery of Cuba - the first night of programming began with a choreographed dance as if the Cubans wanted to set the expectation that no church meeting is complete without dance. Dancing broke out every night after the programming was over, on the bus, and was featured even in the worship service on Sunday morning.

One late night, deep in a conversation with another Cuban pastor about the legacy of colonialism not only for the Cuban church but for the North American mainline Church as well, the pastor said to me, “Dance developed among oppressed peoples as an act of liberation. At a time where colonialists controlled bodies, bought and sold bodies, policed bodies, traumatized bodies, to dance was to say, “my body is not yours to own. This body is a gift from God. This is why white North Americans, in general, seem to have more trouble with dance,” he observed. “You can't dance by working hard to control or worrying about how you look. Dance is the opposite of control. It is an act of freedom in God.”

The Lenten journey – the way of the cross – is a way that invites us to relinquish control to God. To say no to anything demanding more from us that is not part of God's claim and call on our life. Unlike much of what people have come to experience as a part of the Lenten journey, this need not be a dreary process. We are invited to say yes to God - what could be more joyful than that? But for most of us this does prove to be a painful process of dying to things that we've already given too much of our allegiance to. A painful process of saying no to the things that we once said yes to that we see are draining us of our purpose. A process of saying no to the things that we use to fill up that empty, yearning space in our lives, where God belongs.

Ironically, as new liberties have come into Cuban society, the freedom that our friends have experienced until this point might be more difficult to maintain. “This is a spiritual crisis for us,” the pastor of our new sister church in Camajuaní told us, “because people can suddenly see all this information on the Internet but they don't know what to do with the anxiety that comes with it. We are not prepared for this.”

The colonialist in me wanted to say to Marielys, “let us help you with that.” The devil always comes, looking to help. But the fellow Christian in me knew that we would do better to admit that we haven't even recognized this spiritual crisis here much less responded to it well. Better to sit in the wilderness, noticing the hunger, noticing the desire learning to say no to our desire to control or to satiate our hunger on our own; learning to rely on God together.

The question for the day - “What is the no or refusal that you keep postponing?”