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The National Presbyterian Church

Better Late Than Never

Matthew 21:28-31, Luke 19:1-10

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In our sermons through the summer we're looking together at Jesus' teaching and the stories that he told that we call parables. These are stories about nature and about relationships, human relationships which have a spiritual meaning to them, an illustration. Sometimes the illustration is easy to understand and we go "Ah, now I understand what I didn't understand before." But sometimes when Jesus tells parables we end up saying "I'm no further ahead than I was before. This is complicated. This is complex, I don't quite get it." And then, added to that, sometimes when Jesus tells his stories he exaggerates a point to such an extent that we go "Wait a minute. What's going on here? I'm not even sure I agree with that. That's absolutely not fair." When Jesus does that, he often does it on purpose. In fact, even when he tells stories that are complicated he does it on purpose – because he wants to engage those people who are hearing him. He wants them to respond in some way: in *any* way. Even with "I don't agree with what you're saying!" . . . because even in that negative response there is the opportunity for growth and change.

So Jesus always, through his stories, wants to needle his listeners, to get in beneath the skin, to make them think and challenge them, whether the story is easy or hard. And that is certainly the case in the very brief story that I read just a moment ago from Matthew Chapter 21 – the story about a father and the two brothers.

The father was a farmer. He owns a vineyard and he wants his sons to go to work for him. And he asks them if they will do that. One of them immediately says "No I'm not going to go!" And then he goes. And the other says "Yes, I'll do that!" But he doesn't show up: never turns up, never gets around to doing it.

And Jesus turns to those around and says "Now which one of these did the will of his father? Both of them were imperfect! They both should have said yes and done it – yes, yes. But which was better? Yes and then No? Or No and then Yes? And they turn to Jesus and they say "Well, the one who actually did it is the better one, even though he said "No" to begin with. And Jesus, as if to say, "I agree with you," speaks to them a positive word of affirmation . . . before slipping in a downer, a negative word; by saying "You know what? There are some people who are on the outside right now (people who say 'No') who you may think have absolutely no hope at all of ever saying 'Yes,' but they're going to say 'Yes' in the end."

There are some who say “No” and later say “Yes”; and there are others who say “Yes” and who later say “No.” It’s not who gets in there first who matters, says Jesus, but it’s those who get in there at some point or another, and stays to the very end. Those are the ones, those are the ones who end up winning.

This spiritual truth clearly applies in all kinds of areas of life. If I were to illustrate it, I’d turn first to the world of sports where, to me at least, it’s more obvious than in any other area.

If I were supporting a team and I were to say to you, you know my team has the best half-time record of any team you can imagine, you would probably end up saying so what. What matters? It’s who gets there at the final buzzer. It’s not your score in the seventh inning that matters. It’s not your score at the end of the first quarter that matters. It’s not who’s in the lead in the horse race as you turn around the first corner that matters. It’s what happens at the very end, at the buzzer, at the end. That’s what matters. That’s the difference between winning and losing. And you do almost in every game; you’ve got to keep going to the very end.

And that in many senses is Jesus’ point.

My guess is that the vast majority of us have had the experience of watching a game, whether it’s on television or we’re there in person, where our team or the team we’re supporting or the horse we’re counting on goes out to an early lead. And that lead seems to be absolutely insurmountable. I mean, they’re going to win and we’re saying “yes, yes, yes.” But after a few more minutes we begin to say “oh no, no, no,” because we can feel it happening: our team is slipping away and we can see the other team beginning to say “yes, yes, yes” and our team’s going downhill and the opposing team is going uphill, and we can feel the tide changing, the momentum changing. Something is happening in this game and we don’t like it at all so that initial burst of energy dies out. And we get down towards the buzzer and maybe we’re winning but we just have this sense that it is not going to end well. And there’s a final shot, or there’s a final hit and something happens in the bottom of the 9th and the whole thing is turned around.

The yes turns into a no and the no turns into a yes.

It’s so clear to see in sports that it’s really important to hang in there until the end. And even though it’s good to start well, even though it’s good to be ahead at half time, it’s better to be there at the very end.

True in sports – it’s true in other areas of life as well. Madeleine L’Engle in “Story as Search for Truth”¹ tells a story of the impact on her life, both negative and positive, of her mother and her mother’s friends. Positively, the impact on her life of her mother was quite simply profound. She tells the story like this.

When I was in high school and college I looked at some of my mother’s friends – all good Christian church going women – and thought if this is what it means to be grown up I don’t want it. Not my mother herself – she was a remarkable woman who long before I was born had ridden across the Sahara on a camel and up the Andes on a donkey.

She was remarkable.

I know some of you are remarkable and done amazing things. And in fact I want to share with you one amazing thing that I heard just a short time ago, a week ago, about Helen Holt, one of our members. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind me sharing her age.

She's 99. And three weeks ago she received an honorary degree from the University of West Virginia. It's never too late, never too late.

Filled with life – like Madeline L'Engle's mother. Ms. L'Engle goes on:

In North Africa, in those days before planes, there were often long waits in desolate railroad states and my parents with a couple of father's journalist colleagues [DR: it sounds as if her mother may have been the only female in this group of men] would spread a blanket out and play Halma. Halma was originally an Arab game and they would often be ringed by Arabs betting on them, predictably they bet on the men.

My mother who had a mathematical sharpness I have not inherited, almost always won. No, it was not my mother who made me reluctant to be grown up but some of the women around her who had closed in, shut down, lost interest in new ideas, went to church to be safe, not challenged and who had forgotten how to play.

They started well, they started with a “Yes,” they started with a bang. No doubt, well educated, no doubt came from comfortable homes; no doubt they started out with great ideals. BUT at some point or another, Madeleine L'Engle says, they lost it. Their “Yes” drifted into, slid into, a “No.” No more adventure in their life, no more risk in their life. Only preservation, holding on and playing it safe. They were growing old before their time. There may be nothing we can do to stop our bodies growing old, but surely there's plenty we can do to stop our spirits growing old? But they chose not to! They played it safe, closed down, hemmed in, preservation. No risk, no adventure, no fluidity, no flow to life.

Rather like the religious people who surrounded Jesus when he told this story. In fact he primarily told this story for these people who were the guardians of the temple in the big capital city of Jerusalem.

These people who were listening to Jesus tell this story had a high and a holy calling and no doubt many of them became priests because of this sense of privilege. You had to be born into a priestly family to be a priest. But to take up the priesthood, to be a guardian of the temple was a high and noble calling. And no doubt many of them when they began in this task felt that this was the perfect will of God – of the God of the whole universe. But time passed by. And what started off as a high ideal began to drop in its importance. And cynicism would creep in. And self-serving would creep in. They were in power. The temple also functioned as the major bank for Jerusalem as well; the money flowed into this place. Their sense of service to the “God of the whole world” would shrink in time to become a sense of service to “the god of their little world,” the one who would keep them comfortable throughout their days.

It was to these people that Jesus told this particular story . . . about people who said “Yes” to begin with and said “No” in the end; who started out well (yes, some of them almost certainly started out well!) but did not end up well at all. Jesus says to them, “You know what? If you have a choice to make,” (and he laid it before them so they actually had to respond verbally to him), “If you have a choice to make, which is better? To start out well and to end poorly, to begin with a “Yes” and to end with a “No”? Or to come to the game late, to turn up late in the day, to say “No” to begin with, to look as if you'll never say “Yes”, but in the end change your mind so that your “No” becomes a “Yes”?”

They heard the story and they responded to Jesus well. “Quite clearly its better if we were to choose to say “No” to begin with and then to say “Yes.” And Jesus slides it in . . . this is a story

about them. “Yes-ers” who become “No-ers” later. Though it’s more than that, it’s actually a story about all of scripture – and all of us! Scripture is filled with stories of “yes and no” and “no and yes” and “yes and yes” and “no and no” – of people at different stages in life dealing with where God is in their lives.

King Saul. One of the big “Yes/No” stories comes at the foundation of the life of the history of ancient Israel. In the life of the first king of ancient Israel, King Saul, the tribes of Israel were scattered. They had no leader who could bind them together. They wanted a king. And God found them a king, somebody who really could rule them graciously underneath the power of God. His name was Saul. And he began well, but it wasn’t long until he drifted. The power he had went to his head. He thought that he could rule the nation without reference to God and to God’s will and he began to slip away, so that his “Yes” to God ended up being a “No,” and God turned to him and said “I’m taking the kingdom away from you and from your descendants and I’m giving it to another” (1 Samuel 13:15). It’s one of the saddest stories in scripture – a “Yes” that slides and slips into a “No.”

But thank goodness – and those chief priests would have known this – scripture is filled far, far more with stories that begin with a “No” and end up with a “Yes.” Indeed one of the most famous of those stories not surprisingly is the story of *a father and two sons*.

Isaac, Jacob and Esau. The father is Isaac; the two sons are Jacob and Esau. Esau is the older one whose life begins with a “Yes.” Everything should be going his way but it doesn’t. He makes choices which are not good. But then there is Jacob the younger son. And Jacob is unquestionably a “No” child. I mean this is a capital N and a capital O: N.O. No!! He is a sleaze ball of the first order who will do anything to get his way. He will deceive his father. He will cheat his brother. He will take what is not his. He will grab onto it so that he can rise up and if others collapse, that doesn’t matter to him at all. He is a big “No,” and God has no place within his life; nor, it seems, does anybody else.

But that begins to change. You see, when he grabs and gets what he wants, he finds that in the end he loses everything that really matters. He loses his family. He loses his safety! Life is dangerous. He has to flee for his life, and goes away into the middle of nowhere, back where his family had come from years before. And he stays there for years.

But through this time, far away, God is not far away. God will not let him go. There’s something about God that loves “No” people. And Jacob carries with him a sense that God is chasing him, all the way through life, until he, Jacob, changes and his “No” becomes a “Yes.” Jacob returns to his family many years later and God changes his name. His name becomes Israel which means “one who wrestles with God.” God takes him on and he takes God on, and God enters his life in a way that he could not have expected. His “No” becomes a “Yes” and he becomes the forefather of all of God’s ancient people, including those chief priests who are slip sliding from becoming “Yes’s” to “No’s.” The one who stands behind them and in front of them, whose new name identifies them as a people, is not, like them: a “Yes” person to begin with; but he’s an outsider, one who was a “No” who ends up (which is all that counts) as a “Yes.”

Or we might think of the story of Esther, the Queen of Persia who began her life as a “No.” She was a no-body. She was an orphan, a Jewish orphan stuck in the middle of the Persian Empire. You can read her story in the book of Esther in the Bible. She was a nobody but it was as if she won the lottery! She entered a beauty contest to become the Queen of Persia and she became the Queen of Persia from nothing, from obscurity up to the top. She had everything. And she went into protection mode. A big “Yes” became “Yes, I’ve got it all. May nothing disturb what I’ve got!” But it was not to be! Mordecai (who was her cousin who was to her like a father, a man who had raised her when she was an orphan) said to her

“Listen; there is a decree which has been propagated by the king. By this decree our people are going to be slaughtered on a particular day. All the Jewish people slaughtered. And you are the only one who has access to the king to change his mind. You need to go in to see him to change what is about to happen.”

And at first she says “No.” I mean, it’s blunt: “No! I will not go. It’s too risky, it’s too dangerous. I could lose everything including my life.” Life as a game, an adventure, a risk, was over. But Mordecai wouldn’t take “no” for an answer. Like God, he pursued her until she changed her mind and her “No” became a “Yes.” And in that moment of courage and of faith she was used by God to save her people – to change the course of history for her people.

Jesus knew these stories; the chief priests knew these stories. Jesus lived out these stories in the way he dealt with people.

In our scripture reading in Luke’s gospel Jesus enters the city of Jericho and as he enters the city, on his way from Galilee in the north up to Jerusalem in the south, he meets a man by the name of Zacchaeus. Well, in fact Zacchaeus almost drops on him! Zacchaeus is in a tree as Jesus enters Jericho. And Zacchaeus is there humiliating himself (you have to think of it as an act of self-humiliation for this man to climb a tree) because he is desperate to find something more in his life. He’s a tax collector. Now if you think that the IRS is going through a hard time now, and my apologies to those of you involved in any way – if you worked for the Roman tax collecting system – you were in much deeper trouble; negative public opinion about you would be much more severe than anything we can ever imagine. To work for the Romans, to collect taxes was to be a traitor. There were no rules except this rule: “this is the amount you are to raise for us and we don’t care how you get it, and we don’t really care how much you keep for yourself.” That was it. Those were the rules. And Zacchaeus played by the rules. He kept a huge amount for himself. He became exceedingly wealthy but isolated from everyone and isolated from God he was one big no.

But he knew something was missing and he was willing to humble himself, humiliate himself, to climb a tree, when he heard Jesus was coming, as if to say, “perhaps this man Jesus could do something about this “no” life of mine.

And Jesus stops in front of the tree and looks up and he calls him by name. He must have been that famous or infamous that Jesus knew exactly who he was. Calls him by name, says “Come on down. It’s you I want to be with. I want to come to your house today.” And the crowd murmurs, “How can this man Jesus spend time with this ‘no’ person? Shouldn’t he be spending time with us? We are the ‘yes’ people!” But Jesus says no! This is the right man. I’ve come to seek and save that which is lost, all the “no’s” and “maybes.” And from that recognition from Jesus, passionate about this “No” person, Zacchaeus, late in life, becomes a

“Yes” person. His life changes. Jesus says “Today salvation has come to his house.” Today . . . late in the day, but before the end of the game, salvation has come to this house!

It’s a great little story, one of the shortest that Jesus tells. This parable of the father and the two sons – this “Yes” son who says “No,” and this “No” son who says “Yes.” And it certainly contains a message for you and me as well.

I’m one of those “Yes” people. I said “Yes” to Jesus Christ very early on in my life. Always went to church. Made a commitment to Christ when I was 13. I enter this story as one of those priests. I’m the professional religious person to whom Jesus says “*Watch it. Starting off well doesn’t count for anything unless you finish well.*” And I suspect that among us here today there are some who are in exactly this same category as me.

And I would think that our church is in that category. What a heritage we have. We’re a “Yes” place. It’s no guarantee that we’ll be a “Yes” place in the future. Some of the hardest words in all of scripture are spoken to “Yes” churches that become “No” churches. In the second chapter of Revelation (2:4), for example, Jesus speaks to the church in Ephesus and says these words: “You have lost your first love.” Oh my! “You’ve lost your first love!” The passion’s gone, you’re playing it safe. You’re not doing what you ought to do.

It can happen to the best of us says Jesus. Individually. Corporately. Be careful. Seek God’s power, seek God’s help so that your “Yes” doesn’t become a “No.” And if it’s slipping and sliding to become a “No” take comfort (but not your ease! It’s rarely ever easy) because . . . your “No” can become a “Yes” again.

- Some of us may never have said “Yes” to God or to Christ. We’ve always been on the fence.
- Or some of us are “yes/no yes/no no/yes” people. I mean we’re all over the map with our “yesses” and our “noes.”
- Or maybe at this moment in our life we’re in a “No” phase and we’re afraid this is how it will always be. Not so! The grace of God made known to us in Jesus Christ is a grace that pursues “No” people. In fact, my guess is that Christ is on your back right now calling you to say “Yes.” Challenging you, probing you, needling you, this is what Jesus does until you move from that place of “No” into a place of “Yes” which is where by the power of his spirit he wants all of us to be.

Our mission is to be Christ’s agents in this world not just for those who say “Yes” but with countless people (within and beyond our walls) who at the moment say “No.” God wants us to pursue them in love and grace until they say “Yes” too.

Such a simple story – yes and no. Ask God to give you the grace to say “Yes” with every breath of your life from this moment on – for today is the day of salvation.

Let us bow before God in prayer. Holy God, who pursues us in love through Jesus Christ, meet us where we are whether we are saying yes or whether we are saying no, and help us to find a faith in You and a faithfulness to You that nothing can take away. So may we do Your will now and always, Amen.

1. Madeleine L'Engle, "Story as Search for Truth," *Radix Magazine* 2, no. 2, (1994).

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