

Sermon – “Holy Ambivalence”

Sunday, October 1, 2017

Scripture Reading – Exodus 17:1-7, Matthew 21:28-32

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Our first scripture reading is Exodus 17:1-6. The Israelites say “no” to their circumstances as the journey by stages in the wilderness. Hear now God’s holy word.

*1 From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. 2 The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" 3 But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" 4 So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." 5 The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. 6 I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.*

Our second scripture reading is Matthew 21:28-32. This simple parable is told by Jesus a few days before his pending death, at a time in his life he would like to say “no!” The religious leaders of the day were plotting against his life. The mounting tension is apparent in Jesus’ cursing a fig tree for not producing fruit. However, even in the midst of his inner turmoil Jesus continued to heal those who came to him—the blind and the lame. To these religious leaders, Jesus asks a question. Hear now God’s Holy word.

*"What do you think? A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he repented and went. And he went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the harlots believed him; and even when you saw it, you did not afterward repent and believe him.*

The title of the sermon: “Holy Ambivalence”

*The text: “He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went.” Matthew 21:29*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, we thank you for the ambivalence which is a part of all our lives and for the meaning of the “nos” we feel and speak. With each opportunity life presents us, give us the capacity to live the “yes.” May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Today’s scripture readings invite us to reflect upon ambivalence which is a part of each of our lives. *Ambi* is a Latin prefix which means both. A person who is ambidextrous is nimble with

both hands. A person who is ambivalent is caught between contradictory feelings or ideas. When we recognize and honor the conflict within, we can better understand ourselves and grow in healthy, productive ways. Alas, even ambivalence can be Holy, especially when we are able to hold onto it.

Ambivalence is heightened during developmental times of transition as we journey *between places* growing up. The toddler is torn between the independence that comes with walking and the security of being held in a mother's arms. The adolescent is missing the predictability of childhood yet growing into a new body with a world of possibilities. It is the "no" of the toddler and the teen that leads to the "yes" of coming into their own.

In Exodus, the Israelites find themselves *between places* on their journey. Even slavery looked better to them than dying of thirst in the wilderness. They cry out with a resounding NO to their circumstance! They claim the psalms of lament within their faith tradition and make them their own! God hears their cry! God listens to their complaints! God provides the life giving water that allows them to journey to the next stage and live the yes! The two sons in the parable define themselves by their response to do the father's will and we learn that sometimes one has to say "no" before one can say "yes."

As parents, caregivers and leaders, may we listen to the "nos" we hear from those we care about, with understanding rather than judgment. May we respond with insight and grace rather than criticism.

The first time I preached on the parable of the two sons was on the seventh anniversary of my ordination. As I prepared the sermon that week, a close childhood friend's father died unexpectedly and I flew to Chicago for his memorial service. It was an important journey for me, offering new insight into this parable. When I heard of his passing and my friend's loss, I knew with a certainty that I needed to go home, from whence I came, to be with my friend, to comfort her, and to be with my own father.

The memorial service was at the church where I worshiped as a child. It was the church that nurtured my faith with open arms and formed me into who I am today. Within the sanctuary of the First Reformed Church of South Holland I sat with my family on countless Sunday mornings singing hymns, praying, and listening to sermons. In that sanctuary I made my public profession of faith. In that sanctuary I witnessed my sister's marriage as her maid of honor. It was a place of comfort and refuge for me when there was tension and conflict in our home. It provided the foundation of my faith and my call into ordained ministry.

Sadly, it was also the congregation that closed the door to ordination for me as a woman... a rejection that shaped my life and my ministry today. Ironically, I had to say no to the church that nurtured my faith, in order to say yes to what I believed was God's will for my life. It seemed poignant that on the anniversary of my ordination I found myself in the church that I both cherish and disdain.

This journey home was a time of seeing and hearing the truth about my own ambivalence. I experienced both the sweetness and the sorrow of my own life and my friend's grief. As I sat in my parent's kitchen, contemplating this parable, I could not help but wonder about the ambivalence these two sons experienced when their father asked them to work in the vineyard.

Therefore, I invite us to look at this parable from a little different perspective today. The traditional interpretation is the religious leaders are the people who said they would obey God and then did not. The tax collectors and the harlots are those who said they would not obey and later changed their mind and did. Surely, we can look at history and identify those who said yes and lived the no...and those who said no and lived the yes.

However, isn't it true that our lives are not simple yes' and nos. If we are honest with ourselves, we all live with ambivalence... conflicting feelings about the decisions we make, the people we love, and the responsibilities which give our lives meaning.

I would propose that what gave the son the strength to live the "yes" in this parable, to change his mind, and to do God's will, was his ability to acknowledge the "no" within himself and to be honest about his ambivalence. Sometimes we have to say no before we can say yes.

I would go even further to say that what sabotaged the son who did not do God's will was his inability to be honest with himself about his conflicted feelings. By not acknowledging the "no" within himself, he inadvertently lived it.

When Jesus Christ told this parable a few days before his own suffering and death he was living with ambivalence. There was a big part of him that wanted to say "no" to the whole ordeal. The gospels make no attempt to deny Christ's inner conflict and neither should we. *Father, if it be thy will, let this cup pass from me.*

My friends—ambivalence is a powerful part of our lives. We can, at times, be overwhelmed by the "nos" we feel, especially when we want to say and to do the "yes." Perhaps what Christ is offering us in this simple story is an invitation to embrace the "no" within, so that by grace we may live the YES!

Thank God for Holy ambivalence! Amen.