

Sermon – “Defining Moments”

Sunday, September 28, 2014

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

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As we continue to explore the kingdom of God through Christ’s parables, our first scripture reading is Exodus 17:1-7, which recalls a defining moment as the Israelites sojourn in the wilderness with Moses. The people say no to their circumstance and request water. Moses understands the request as a criticism of his leadership, which he equates with “testing God”. Yahweh responds, not to Moses concern for himself, but to the people’s need for water, which flows generously! Hear now God’s word.

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. 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?" 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?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." 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. 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, a parable unique to Matthew. This poignant story is told as Jesus finds himself in the midst of a defining moment in his life, one to which he would like to say “no!” The chapter begins with Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem, a few days before his pending death. It is a day of great joy for the people who have come to understand Jesus as the window through which they see God. The joyous entry is followed, however, by Jesus turning the tables in the temple, no longer able to contain his feelings about how his father’s house was being used. The religious leaders of the day had come to equate themselves with God. Rather than seeing Jesus as the window to God, they saw Jesus as a threat to their authority and were plotting against his life. Jesus continued to baffle those who tried to entrap him intellectually. To these presumptuous 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: “Defining Moments”

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 defining moments in our lives which shape who we are. With each opportunity life presents us to do your will, give us the capacity to live the “yes.” As we reflect on scripture together, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Defining moments can be precipitated by external circumstances like the drought California is experiencing this year...the lack of water is affecting the flow of many people's lives in this part of the country and heightening concerns about what climate change means for all of us down the road.

This past week I visited California with Reverend Dreitcer, our Associate Pastor for Family Ministry, on her journey home to be ordained at Sleepy Hollow Presbyterian Church, the faith community which nourished and sustained her spirit through the years...the faith community which gathered around her family in a defining moment of their life together when Hannah's mother, who was the Pastor of Sleepy Hollow, died unexpectedly. It was important for Hannah to go home, from whence she came, to be ordained by this faith community, and I was honored to be in their midst as they celebrated their daughter and this milestone in her life, which was the culmination of a journey traveled in stages, with discipline, thought, and perseverance.

The evening Hannah and I arrived in San Francisco, the rain fell with a refreshing clamoring on the rooftop and pitter patter on the window pane throughout the night. It was the most rain California has received since last April; a gift we celebrated with our hosts...and a gift we could not help but also experience as a symbolic blessing, a baptism of sorts, a calling out of affirmation from on high for this joyous occasion!

Defining moments are the decisions we make, the disappointments we persevere and the life we live. Defining moments are the highs and the lows that shape our character—who we are and who we will become! Defining moments are to be honored, reflected upon and understood, because how we remember these moments in our lives and the interpretations and meanings we give them are as important as the moments themselves.

The late William Sloane Coffin, who served as Chaplain of Yale University before becoming pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, reflected on a conversation he had with a contemporary in the video "An American Prophet." Reverend Coffin asks his colleague "Richard, what makes you cry?" Without a moment's hesitation, his friend said, "I cry whenever I see or hear the truth."

Defining moments are those times in our lives when we see or hear the truth—about ourselves, about the people we love and about that which gives our life meaning. Today's scripture readings invite us to reflect on the defining moments within our lives.

In Exodus 17 we read: *From the wilderness the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages.* The metaphor of *life as a journey* has a long history in our faith tradition. Each time an infant is baptized into our congregation, another faith journey begins. Each journey lasts a lifetime and grows and changes through stages. There is richness in being a part of a faith community that understands and celebrates that we *journey by stages*. Today we welcome new members and we celebrate milestone anniversaries of members who have journeyed with us fifty, sixty and seventy years. We honor the defining moments on these journeys. What a privilege it is for Westminster to provide sacred space along the way...rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep... and to be a place for honest reflection and accountability during each stage.

My husband Peter, who is a pediatrician, and I have taught a course on "Faith Development" over the years. Not surprisingly there are parallels among the stages of psychosocial, cognitive, moral and faith development. The stages of transition are always the most difficult and challenging because of the ambivalence one feels journeying *between places*.

In Exodus, the Israelites find themselves in a stage of transition, *between places* when they experience a defining moment 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!

As parents and teachers, as friends and colleagues when we hear the 'nos' along the way from those we care about – those with whom we journey, may we respond with understanding rather than judgment. May we respond with insight and grace rather than criticize that empower them to live the "yes."

In the parable that Jesus told in Matthew's gospel, the two sons define themselves by their response to do the father's will and we learn that sometimes we have to say "no" before we can say "yes." The conventional interpretation of this parable is that the religious leaders are the people who said they would obey God and then did not. The tax collectors and the prostitutes are those who said they would not, changed their minds and did.

Today, I invite us to look at this parable from, yet, another perspective; one that has grown out of my personal struggle on my faith journey as well as my professional experience as a pastor, whether serving a congregation, as a chaplain or a pastoral counselor. As people have courageously explored their feelings with me in the safety of the pastoral relationship and confronted their inner doubts and turmoil. As people have complained about their circumstances in the rich tradition of the psalms of lament and said "no" during difficult times of transition. I have witnessed God provide the life-giving resources of healing and acceptance, time and time again, freeing people up to journey to the next stage and to live productive and healthy lives.

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

I would propose this morning that what gave the son the strength to live the "yes" in this parable and do God's will was his ability to acknowledge also the "no" within...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. Matthew makes 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 do and say "yes." Perhaps what Christ is offering us in this simple story is the freedom to live with our "nos" and to be honest about our conflicting feelings. So that even in the midst of our uncertainty, we can, face those defining moments in our lives with confidence, say "NO" with boldness and by the grace of God, live the YES! Amen.