

First Sunday of Lent
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Matthew 4:1-11

First United Church of Christ, Northfield
Rev. Sandra K. Johnson
February 10, 2008

Saying "No"

One of the few really helpful pieces of child rearing advice I got when our children were young actually came from my own father. "Don't say 'no' unless you mean it," he said, "and then say it like you mean it."

Well, Jesus meant it when he said "no" to each of the temptations that came to him in the wilderness, and he said so clearly in this story with which we always start the season of Lent. To Satan's offers of spectacular economic, political, and spiritual power, Jesus says, simply, "no." Against three offers to be like God, Jesus resists and refuses. It is no wonder that the season of Lent has traditionally been a time to say "no" to worldly pleasures and indulgences, a time to "give up" candy or teasing your little brother. Here, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus defines himself and his work by what he gives up, what he rejects, and what he will not do: "I will not use my power to serve myself; I will not use my power to intimidate people or to test God; I will not use my power to control or exploit others."

The impact of all of these "no's," however, is to make room for a great many "yeses." The decision not to serve himself opened up the possibilities of serving others; the decision not to intimidate others opened up the possibility of developing relationships of truth and understanding, and the decision not to control and exploit others resulted in new models of working together collaboratively and cooperatively.

That is the curious thing about saying "no." Every time we say no or set a limit, we create space for something else. We know this is true in the simplest form from our daily lives. Cleaning out a drawer or a closet makes it possible to more easily use and enjoy the things that remain. Letting go of an old habit makes it possible to add interesting and healthy new activities to our days. Ending an unsatisfactory relationship makes room for us to invest ourselves into connections that are mutually nurturing and positive. On a personal level, saying "no" is often a way of renewing our spirits and moving forward.

Two of the books I read during my sabbatical offer the same observation about the lives of churches – that congregations need to say "no" to some of their activities and programs so that they can say "yes" to their deeper calling. Dave Ferguson, in The Big Idea, maintains that an average Sunday morning has too many ideas for us to deeply wrestle with any one of them. Similarly, Thom Rainer, in Simple Church, argues that churches should stick to making disciples, and leave everything else to other groups and institutions. These authors serve churches with quite different priorities and governance structures than ours, but they nonetheless powerfully and poignantly remind us that sometimes our eagerness to do more results in congregation life that feels scattered and over demanding, instead of inspiring and renewing.

Saying “no” can also be a powerful part of our theological understanding. The first century church fathers maintained that God is too vast and mysterious to be known directly; we can know only a little about God, and some of that little knowledge is actually about what God is not. By specifying the characteristics that do not describe God, we begin to understand more about what God might be like.

Sometimes we must actively give up our ideas of what God is like, and say “no” to traditional or conventional beliefs. UCC President and General Minister John Thomas raised this possibility in his recent pastoral letter on faith engaging science and technology: A New Voice Arising.

... our universe has expanded and so has our understanding of God. Our faith has nothing to do with clinging to ancient misconceptions. Our faith is not in the worldviews of ancient theologians or the cosmologies of biblical texts, as majestic as these might have been. Our faith is in the living God, who always goes ahead of us, speaking, calling, and creating. Gone is the old view of a small, static universe, with fixed species dwelling on a fixed earth. Gone is the old view of a small, static God. We believe that God yearns for us to understand nature more fully and to love it more deeply. God speaks in many ways and through many voices. Today, one of God’s most provocative voices is in science. We listen and respond, grateful that our theology is enriched by new ideas.

At the Ash Wednesday service I asked everyone to write down something that they wanted to leave behind this Lent. The papers on which they wrote were burned with the fronds from last year’s Palm Sunday procession and became part of the ashes with which we were all marked that evening. These were our personal “no’s,” the habits and ideas we wanted to turn away from, the mistakes and disappointments and sorrows we wanted to leave behind. There is great power, I think, in the ritual of wearing those “no’s” on our foreheads or on our hands. For a few hours, at least, we are marked as people who have repented, who have chosen to leave some parts of our lives behind so that new parts can be born, nurtured, recognized, and offered in loving service.

Saying “no” is not only about repentance; it is also about offering resistance – in both the healthy and unhealthy senses of that word. Sometimes – often when we are weary, stressed, confused, or defensive – we use the word “no” to resist change. It becomes our way of supporting and defending the way things have always been done, even if those ways have not led to the results we hope for. That sort of “no” and that sort of “resistance” are wearing on people and institutions. But the healthier sort of resistance occurs when we use our voices to say “no” to the powers and principalities that exploit our brothers and sisters, that use violence to gain and keep power, or that waste and misuse the resources of the earth. The “no” that resists evil and injustice makes space for compassion, healing, and justice to be planted.

Sometimes our “no’s” are hidden until a light is shone on them. The UCC has two new radio ads that make fun of churches that proclaim themselves as accepting but tacitly

screen out certain people: the poor, gay men and lesbian women, noisy children, divorced persons, single parents, people who just look different than the folks already sitting in the pews. At our best, these commercials highlight the “no” that we have said to intolerance and the “yes” we say to radical hospitality. When we are less than our best, though, we can become precisely what we ridicule: a church where the promised welcome does not quite live up to its publicity. It is not really as easy to say “yes” as we would like to believe.

Which brings us back to Eve and Adam. The conventional interpretation of this story of the fruit of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” is that these first humans said “no” to God, and defied God’s limitations on what they could eat in the Garden of Eden. We say that they “gave in” to temptation, and we hold up Jesus as a better, nobler model of the person who “resisted” temptation. But we might also notice that even their “no”, their disobedience, made room for something new: human life lived with the knowledge of good and evil, of life and death. It may be Adam and Eve, as much as Jesus, who show us how to say “no” during this season of Lent.

And frankly, we need all the help we can get. With the possible exception of those times when we are just crabby and resistant, saying “no” takes courage and vision and prayerful discernment. We need our faith community to help us acknowledge our selfishness and ambition and instead to envision selflessness and compassion. We need our faith community to hear us and support us when we speak the truth to power. We need our faith community to console us when our efforts fail and our motives are questioned and we are weary.

Lent is not a solitary journey; it is a trip that we undertake together. Together we can discern what we need to say “no” to, and together we can say it like we mean it.

Amen.

Prayer for February 10, 2008

Almighty and everlasting God, creator of all things seen and unseen, hear now our silent prayers, as we open our hearts to you in the sacred quietness.

God of faith and hope, we bring before you our prayers for those we have named this morning – we especially remember ... Bring to each of them the gifts of mercy and grace that are most needed, according to your wisdom and love.

God of our hearts and minds, this morning we offer our prayers for those circumstances in our lives that we cannot usually bring ourselves to say aloud. Help us to name before you and one another the disappointments, shames, sorrows, and shortcomings that eat away at our faith and our wellbeing.

We pray for our relationships that are conflicted, dispirited, and unfulfilling.

We pray for those who are troubled about their sexuality, and about their intimate relationships.

We pray for ourselves and our loved ones who live with mental illness.

We pray for ourselves and our loved ones who live with chronic health conditions.

We pray for everyone who has been betrayed, cheated, or defrauded.

We pray this morning for those who live with addictions and alcoholism.

We pray for those who have lost their employment, or who are employed at work that is demeaning, dangerous, or disheartening.

We pray for those in financial difficulties, whether of their own making or the result of unexpected events.

And we pray for the secrets of our hearts that we can speak only to you.

All of these things we pray in the name of the one who listens with loving attention to all of our sorrows, and who bears them with us, even Jesus the Christ, and we pray together now in the words that he taught us ...

This is a revision of the prayers for May 1, 2005, July 17, 2005, February 5, 2006, April 9, 2006, August 13, 2006, May 20, 2007, August 19, 2007, and October 14, 2007