

Saying *Yes* and Doing *Yes* by the Rev. Dr. Paul S. Nancarrow

Our Gospel lesson this morning seems at first glance to set before us a very simple, very straightforward, binary, either/or choice: Who do we want to be like? Which of the brothers in the parable will we take for our role model? How will we respond when God calls us to labor in God's harvest?

That either/or choice is precisely what Jesus puts before the chief priests and elders in his controversy with them. "What do you think?" Jesus says: a man has two sons, and he goes to them and says "Go and work in the vineyard today; go do the deeds that are part of your family responsibility and part of your family inheritance." One son says, "Of course I'll go work in the vineyard. I honor and obey you, father, and it is a privilege to me to do the work that you have given me to do"—but as soon as his father is out of the room, he goes back to what he was doing before, and ignores his father's summons, and never goes out to work. His words to his father say *Yes*, but his actions say *No*. The other son, meanwhile, responds to his father by saying, "No way! I'm not going out to work today; I have things to do, I have people to see, I have my own agenda, I have my own life, and I'm not going to let you or any 'family responsibility' get in the way of me doing what I want to do. No way!" But later, after his father has gone away, he changes his mind, and he puts on his work clothes and he picks up his viticulture tools and he goes out to work in the vineyard. This son's words say *No*, but in the end his actions say *Yes* to his father's will for him.

"Now," Jesus says, "which of these sons would you want to be like? Which of these sons does what his father wants?" And the chief priests and elders, probably seeing the trap they're walking into but having no idea how to get out of it, say, "Well, um, I guess the one who went out and worked in the vineyard did what his father wanted." And that's when Jesus lets them have it: "You priests and elders," he says, "you're just like the son whose words say *Yes* but actions say *No*. You claim to honor God; you claim to follow God's teaching, God's Torah; you claim to obey all the commandments God has given for purity of life—but when it comes to the things God *really* wants, when it comes to justice and righteousness and peacemaking and mercy and compassion and forgiveness and love—these things you ignore. And even when God sends you a messenger like John the Baptist to call you back to repentance and righteousness, even then you don't believe him, you don't follow him, you oppose him and you challenge him and you're glad when he's imprisoned and executed. You priests and elders," Jesus says, "you say *Yes* to God, but what you do is *No*."

But the tax collectors and the prostitutes, Jesus says, are like the other son: they say *No* to God at first, but later on their actions say *Yes*. And make no mistake about it: the tax collectors and prostitutes do say *No* to God; they do openly flout God's commandments, they do openly refuse to participate in their people's inheritance of faith. The tax collectors handled a lot of Roman money, and Roman coins had the image of the emperor stamped on them, and the genius, the spirit, of the emperor was considered a divinity in Roman state religion—so most Jews thought Roman coins were idols, and dealing in idolatry is against the Second Commandment, so the tax collectors break the commandment and say *No* to God. And the prostitutes, of course, traded in adultery, and "No adultery" is the Seventh Commandment, and so the prostitutes break the commandment and say *No* to God. We must not romanticize the tax collectors and prostitutes if we really want to get the point that Jesus is making: they were *not* nice people, they were *not* faithful people, they were *not* doing what God wanted them to do. But when John the Baptist came, and offered them repentance and a new chance for righteousness, they recognized how important that was, and they believed. And that made them like the son who says *No* but does *Yes*; that made them, paradoxically, more righteous than the chief priests and elders. That's the accusation Jesus makes against the priests and elders when they challenge him about his authority.

And that's where the Gospel story turns and puts the question back on us: Who do *we* want to be like? Which son in the parable will *we* emulate? Given what Jesus says to the priests and the elders, do we want to be more like them, or more like the tax collectors and prostitutes?

At least, that is the question the Gospel *seems* to put before us. But I have to admit, the more I look at this choice, the more carefully I read over this Gospel, the less satisfied I am that those are the only two options. We can say *Yes* and do *No*, and that clearly is not pleasing to God; or we can say *No* and do *Yes*, which is more like what God wants, but which still has something missing, which still is not entire openness to God's Word. The whole parable leaves me feeling like there ought to be something more, there ought to be a *third* option, there ought to be a third son in the

story, there ought to be a way that we can respond to God's call by saying *Yes* and by doing *Yes*. The parable itself doesn't resolve that, the parable itself kind of leaves us hanging, as parables often do—until we can make the leap of faith to see for ourselves a *new* option for responding to God's call.

And that new option is Jesus himself. Jesus is the one who says *Yes* to God, and who does that *Yes* in his teaching and his preaching and his healing and his living and his dying and his rising to life again. Jesus is the “third son,” of the parable, the true Son, the Son who shows all of us the way that we can faithfully respond to God both in word and in deed. That's what Paul is talking about in our Epistle lesson today, when he says: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”—the mind of Christ, that pours itself out in humble obedience to God, the mind that says *Yes* and does *Yes*—that mind can be in us too, that mind can empower us and inspire us and enlighten us to believe in God's call and to behave in ways that live out that call.

So the real message of the Gospel to us today is not just that we have to choose which brother we want to be like; the real message is an invitation and a call to let our words about God and our actions for God measure up to each other. The real message is that if we *say* God calls us to justice and righteousness and peacemaking and compassion and forgiveness and love, then we must allow the mind of Christ to dwell in us and make our *actions* be all about justice and righteousness and peacemaking and compassion and forgiveness and love.

That message of the Gospel is true for us Christians in all times and places; but I think it has a particular urgency for us, as Christians in America, at this time and this place. As we grapple with the fallout of financial crisis and rising prices and mortgage foreclosures—as the troubles on Wall Street make us more and more nervous about how we're going to manage on Main Street—in the midst of all this I think it is crucial for us to remember that our words about God and our actions for God must measure up to each other. Jesus calls us to a life of right relationships: Jesus' commandment of love, Jesus' gift of communion, Jesus' call to work in the vineyard, are all about right relationships. Paul sums up that quality of relational life really wonderfully when he writes “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” And it's that question of interests that seems to me to be so crucial right now. Over the last week, as I've read headlines about bailout plans and bank seizures, as I've heard pronouncements from pundits and politicians and candidates, I've found myself wondering just whose interests are being served in all these things. I've heard what sounds to me like the interests of ideologies, or party platforms, or maximized profits. I've found myself thinking “He's only saying that because he wants to get elected” or “They're just saying that to save their company” or “He just supports that plan because it will concentrate more power in his hands.” Of course, these problems are deeply complex and complicated; and I can't judge the motives of others: and I know I certainly don't have the answers. But as I listen to everything that's going on, I do have questions; and more and more my questions are about whose interests are being served, and how what we say measures up to what we do, and what we can do together to make sure that we are looking out for each other's interests for the common good.

And that's why I think that we, as people of faith, as Christians who are also citizens, I think we have a particular role to play in our national debates, we have a particular message to share with our lawmakers and leaders, we have a particular ideal to hold up for our financial and economic and material community life. We can keep asking whose interests are served. We can keep advocating for the needs of the poor and the foreclosed and the disempowered and the disenfranchised among us. We can keep giving of our material goods, through SACRA and Noon Lunch and other programs, to make sure that people right here in Staunton who are affected by this crisis can have their interests looked out for. We can keep living out the Good News that God in Christ calls us to believe in right relationships of mutual well-being, and God in Christ empowers us to behave for right relationships of mutual well-being. And that Good News, I believe, is meant for our political life and our financial life and our economic life, every bit as much as it is for our personal life.

In our Gospel today Jesus calls us to say *Yes* to God and do *Yes* for God. Let it be our prayer today that we may answer Jesus' call: that we may believe deeply in God's promises, and behave faithfully for God's purposes, in time of crisis and in all our times. Amen.