

Sermon for Catonsville Presbyterian Church
Sunday August 23rd, 2020
By Rick Santos

Saying Yes and Saying No

Waves of Change

I am always surprised how change comes in waves. Much like an ocean wave, sometimes it comes with a regular beat as change is a constant, but it can also come like a Tsunami, quickly, unexpectedly, crashing hard and altering the landscape. External change, which we can't control, creates new realities that cascade in different directions, often significantly influencing life's path in ways not foreseen. In this way, it is similar to the Evolutionary biologist, Stephen Jay Gould's theory of punctuated equilibrium. In Gould's theory, change is not slow but moves in bursts where many things change at once. Just as rapid change happens in scientific evolution, so it happens in our personal lives and society as a whole.

Even when we most often think of change as coming from an external source, **we are actually the epicenter of change in our own lives** by making decisions that can have the same ripple effect as external change; and our ability to instigate change, even Tsunami level profound change in our lives, can be as simple as saying yes or saying no.

In both types of change, external and internal, I believe God is at work. So, saying yes and saying no, can make external change better or worse. Furthermore, saying yes or no can and is often completely independent of the external change around us and can set us off on our own very personal trajectories.

Ghost Ranch and Robert McAfee Brown

I learned a very important lesson about the power of saying yes and saying no in 1987, when I was fortunate to be invited to Ghost Ranch Presbyterian Retreat Center in Abiquiu, New Mexico as part of their annual College Staff program.

Ghost Ranch is in the northern New Mexico mesa country--the "in between place" where the Southwest desert meets pine forests, and is a place where people come to rest, relax and learn.

As college staff, I worked several jobs at the conference center to help it cope with the influx of visitors during the summer. I was fortunate enough to be able to meet some of the interesting people that lead and participated in the week-long adult education courses.

That summer I met Robert McAfee Brown, a Presbyterian theologian, who had just written a book, *Saying Yes and Saying No: On Rendering to God and to Caesar*. I remember being told by the Ranch Director that I should “really find a way to” sit in on Dr. Brown’s talks and that he, like other guests, would find time to talk with staff at meals and when he was not leading his sessions. After dinner one day, I sat with a group of staff listening to him talking about his new book. I was moved by his simple but profound insights on saying yes and saying no, **how each one of us can take a stand on doing what is right and just, no matter what the situation.** Dr. Brown talked about how difficult and life changing—and possibly life threatening-- it can be to stand on the side of justice, going against the powers that be. I also interpreted this to mean that saying yes and no, not only matters on issues of justice, but saying yes to God’s will in your life, which can manifest in many different ways.

We are all connected

In today’s reading, Romans 12:1-8, hear again Paul’s words from verses 4 & 5:

4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

This passage is closely linked to 1 Corinthians: 26: If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

We are all connected, and if Covid 19 has not made this abundantly clear, I don’t know what else will. Our own well-being, something we all know, but often take for granted, is connected to others’ well-being. If my family and my neighbor are not well, that can and does impact me, and other families and neighbors. Multi-generational families in one home know this very clearly, as the older members often carry more health risk. The connections are not just physical, but also emotional and spiritual. We are connected. We are members of one another. When even one of us is infected, the risk of all of us becoming infected is exponentially greater.

It feels, to me, as if we are living in a parallel universe these days of Covid-19, all of us trying to live our daily lives as normally as we can, everything outside my window looks about the same, but walking down the street, it is clear, our daily lives are in fact very different. The way we now work, shop and interact with others, and worship can be disorienting. With daily infection counts and the news being dominated by data, science and the hard reality that life is different now and will never quite be the same, Covid 19— has already brought a tsunami of change to our lives.

And sometimes it feels like we have lost our common sense, so what should we say yes to and no to in this moment. What is God's call to us as we grapple with this new reality and the change around us? Perhaps simple things that make sense, save lives, and are the lowest tech approach to defeating the virus--saying yes to something as simple as wearing a mask, to washing your hands frequently and to creating more physical distance. Saying yes to saving lives, building strong community bonds because we are all in this together. Saying yes to Jesus' teachings of our shared humanity.

But also, being ready to say no to narratives that are false, disregard science, disregard common sense, and disregard care for others. We need to say no to misinformation and to fear mongering which tries to pit us against each other. The challenges of this moment are heightened against a backdrop of an election season, which has seemed to polarize even the most simple and straightforward issues and messages.

I have seen how simply saying yes and saying no has altered the last two large Ebola outbreaks. As many of you at Catonsville know, I was CEO of IMA World Health for almost 10 years, and during that time we responded to multiple Ebola outbreaks in the DRC and also in West Africa. One of the things that we did was focus on the community response, as that was the key lever for overcoming the outbreak. In West Africa we worked with the Christian Health Association of Liberia and in the DRC we worked with Heal Africa and others to educate and create behavior change with religious and community leaders so that high risk practices were eliminated and safe practices could be taught and adapted.

Even though today's Covid outbreak is very different from Ebola, the same basic approach of reducing high risk behaviors and practicing safe behaviors are the same--simply put, the technical solution will be worked out eventually including a vaccine and treatment, but instead of waiting for that, know that simple changes in behavior can address much of this problem. We must say yes to science, but also to each other. That was the key to defeating the Ebola outbreaks--communities, church leaders, and many others shared information on high risk practices and were able to end the outbreak by being connected.

Let's take this idea of saying yes and no, and think about it even more closely related to what Dr. Brown shared with me many years ago, in light of our readings today. Paul's letters were to a church suffering persecution, and his emphasis on being one body means not only do we share a common humanity, including health, but he also meant we belong to those who are forlorn, treated unjustly and forgotten. Paul helps us get to yes or no, helps us create a framework for making these decisions, through spiritual and human one-ness with God and with every person.

The murder of George Floyd among many other similar events during this Covid-19 crisis has created a new moment for racial justice consciousness to bloom in our country. In this moment, we must again say yes to Jesus, and by doing that we also say yes to justice, no to intolerance, no to racism and no to demonizing the Other. Lifting up the Black Lives Matters movement, and the long history of injustice towards African Americans and what many call the “original sin” of slavery in our country, we need to think about where we go from here, and how we as a country can truly and fundamentally address centuries of injustice, oppression and systemic racism.

We need to know, deep in our hearts and bones, that we are all connected and we are **one body** in Christ, and we need to know when to say yes, and when to say no, and we need to know that by saying yes and no we might just reset the trajectory that our lives are currently on. **We can create the change in society ourselves**, and it can be as simple as to:

Say yes to justice and “no” to keeping things the same out of our desire to remain comfortable.

Say “yes” to the idea of caring more about the Other and our one-ness with them and “no” to being an island to ourselves.

Say yes to the idea that being the church happens every day and “no” to the idea that church is only for Sunday or a particular place.

The waves and burst of change *at such a time as this*, in this strange and remarkable year 2020, will set a new trajectory for our country and the world, and for us individually. **Because we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.** In embracing yes to the ways of Christ we become changed - sometimes knowingly, and other times without realizing it. But when we say yes to each other, we say yes to Christ, honoring one another and our unity, and honoring Christ. And our **“Yes!” to Christ will always create the right change that will carry us forward--together.**

AMEN!