

Matthew 21:23-32

²³When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" ²⁴Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ²⁶But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." ²⁷So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the

tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

The Way Things Work

“I don’t think I want to go to Madagascar!”

These were the words spoken by Rev. Sam Knight when he had been invited to travel south to a place filled with dancing lemurs and other wondrous things.

“My passport is expired.” An obstacle. An excuse. Insurmountable? No. But an obstacle, a reason not to go. Another reason to lounge.

And yet the passport arrived in time. It was God’s nudge on the shoulder. “Go to Madagascar,” God was saying.

Dan and Elizabeth Turk, names that might be familiar to you, were the ones who greeted this group upon their arrival in Madagascar. Elizabeth Turk is the daughter of Bill Warlick, the first pastor of this church. These two missionaries are supported by this congregation, encouraged and prayed for by those in these very pews. They are hard at work, as Rev. Knight discovered.

There are close to five million Christians in the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar. Since 2007 52 New Church Developments have been initiated. Dan and Elizabeth are within the Development department, and they use their knowledge, gifts and experience to help practically and spiritually. They are involved with tree nurseries and HIV/AIDS awareness. They work with clean water as well as sharing the Living Water of Jesus Christ. She educates about large families and little food. He teaches about citrus trees and how to optimize the crops. This is all done in the midst of complete poverty and devastating hunger.

Rev. Knight's first answer to Madagascar was no, but as his no became yes he gained a better understanding of how God calls each of us to be missionaries to the world; some to the community around them, some to communities on the other side of the world.

There is another great example of a no turning into a yes. How many of us grew up hearing stories of Jonah, the prophet who tried to run from God. In perhaps the most famous no of the Bible, Jonah found a ship bound for anywhere but Nineveh, believing he could escape the command given by God. His no led him into the belly of a great fish, where for three days he had the chance to think about his answer. Perhaps not so surprisingly, after being vomited onto the beach by this fish his no became yes and the city of Nineveh repented of their sins, led by the King as they begged God to spare their lives. Jonah's first answer to Nineveh was no, but as it became a yes God did great things through him.

In our Gospel passage today we hear Jesus weaving this tale to the chief priests and the elders, ending with a sharp blow to their challenge. He speaks directly to their hardened hearts, hearts that refused to hear the testimony of John the Baptist, hearts that refuse to see Jesus Christ for who he truly is. Jesus accuses them of being like the second child, who affirmed his father's wishes and then failed to follow up. These chief priests and elders, despite having the Son of God before them, continue to fail to heed his words, clinging instead to their traditions, blockading their hearts from being converted and renewed to live passionately for God. And to add injury to insult, Jesus Christ contrasts them to tax collectors and prostitutes, placing them ahead of the religious scholars of the day. Surely by this point the jaws of these men must have been on the ground as they were appalled at the words of Christ. Who was he to place sinners

above them in the Kingdom of Heaven? Didn't he know how seriously they took their religion? Didn't he understand that it was just those sinners they were trying to keep out? The nerve of Jesus!

The nerve indeed. As I read and study the words of Christ I continue to stumble across them, finding myself sprawled out across the ground as I have tried to hurdle across them, around them, anything to prevent my having to walk through them, for they are so challenging. Giving everything to God? Follow the example of this man who willingly dined and spent time with sinners? Not clinging to my own property, my own hard-earned money, my own selfish pride? Take up my cross? The nerve of Jesus Christ to interfere with my comfortable life and try to lead me down paths I wonder if I have the strength to walk.

How many times have I said no to the path laid before me? I'm not even sure what my no's look like anymore, so smooth they have become. They are like second nature, a knee-jerk reaction when presented with a challenge. Surely that can wait for another day, I think. I'll have more opportunities, more moments, more days when I can rise to meet the challenge, as I settle into my couch and tune out the world.

How easy and natural no becomes. Yes is so much more difficult. Yes means taking up the challenge, using resources we have saved for a rainy day, offering all of ourselves, even those sides we're not so proud of, to God so that God can use them. How might God use the yes's in our lives?

I believe God uses them for things like fruit trees in Madagascar. I wonder what it was like when the thought first crossed the mind of Dan and Elizabeth Turk that orchards in Madagascar might be in their future. Perhaps it was some variant of the same thought that drove Jonah to find a ship going anywhere but Nineveh, the thought

that perhaps God is asking the wrong question to the wrong person, and that a yes to God now might mean giving up so much comfort and security here.

But a yes to God doesn't have to mean Madagascar. A yes to God may mean considering being part of a Living Waters for the World trip to Mexico, or Haiti, to install a clean water filtration unit. A yes to God may mean working with Habitat for Humanity here in Chattanooga. It may mean serving on a committee or leading a Bible Study. It may mean calling a friend who hasn't been in church for a few weeks or welcoming the stranger down the pew. It may mean any number of things. The wonderful thing is that the father in Jesus' story goes to his sons and presents the opportunity to them, just as our Father in Heaven places opportunities before us to use us and our passion for God. Our Gracious Father uses situations and people in ways unimaginable to do His will. There are countless questions God is bringing before each of you that I have not even imagined. How might we say yes together to the dreams you have of serving God here and now as a congregation?

God is continuing to ask the questions. God is continuing to dream, and God is continuing to dream far beyond what we can imagine. How might God use our 'yes' today?

Let us pray.