Sunday, October 21, 1984
YES AND NO
Matthew 21:28-31

There are some people who when they say “yes” mean “no,” and there are others who when they say “no” mean “yes.” To put it another way — there is often a difference between what we say we are going to do, and what we actually do. Some people talk a good game, but when it comes down to the playing of the game, nothing much happens.

In the area of religion, there are people who say all the right words, who know and can speak all the pious phrases, who can quote the Bible readily, and who can pray eloquently out loud when called upon with no advance warning; yet when it comes to practicing the love of God and neighbor, instead of talking about it — there is a void. There is vast difference between what people say that believe and how they behave.

To make matters worse, those who are absolutely certain that they have the right belief and the correct doctrine tend to be self-righteous. They have no doubts which adds to the self-righteousness.

It’s true not only in religion, but also in politics. The true believer will forgive one for almost anything except deviation from the party line.

There is a tendency among true believers to judge others by what they believe. They want to be sure that the rest of us have the correct beliefs and the right doctrine.

There’s nothing new about this. In Jesus’ time there were those who were critical of him because they were not sure that he had the correct beliefs — and they were even more critical of him because of his association with sinners and unbelievers — people they were certain had the wrong ideas and beliefs about God. To make it worse, some of these sinners and unbelievers had become followers and close associates of Jesus.

So, it was that Jesus told a parable in answer to the complaints and criticisms of the good church people of the time. Invited to pass judgment on this simple and seemingly harmless story, they found that the story backfired and they were caught in its trap.

Jesus asked, “What do you think?” And then he told the story. A man had two sons and he went to the first and said, “Go and work in the vineyard today.” The son answered, “No,” but afterward he went and worked anyway. He said to the second son, “Go work in the vineyard,” and he said, “Yes,” he would do so, but did not. “Which of these two,” asked Jesus, “did the will of his father?” And they answered, “the first son — the one who said ‘no’ but then went and did the work anyway.”

The parable has a timeless quality about it, and its truth applies to all of our living — not just to our religious beliefs and actions. It contrasts believing and behaving, saying and doing, image and reality.

1. First, the parable tells us that sometimes we say “Yes,” but really mean “No.”

A) Sometimes we say “yes” without thinking through the implications of our response. Other times we say “yes” without taking the request too seriously. We might say “yes” in order to get

the person who is asking us to do something to quit bothering us, knowing all the time that w have no intention of carrying out our promise.

Many sales people have had the experience of getting a potential buyer to say “yes” too easily only to discover that the customer backs out of the sale, changes his or her mind when it is time to make the delivery and collect the money.

I remember a number of years ago when we were having an Every Member Canvass in this church and were visiting church members in their homes in order to obtain their pledges for the coming year. One canvasser came back all excited because he had called on an individual and not only had the member said yes very quickly to the request for a pledge, but also told the canvasser he wanted to double the pledge for the coming year. What the canvasser didn’t know was that none of the pledge wd ever be paid.

In performing marriage ceremonies, I’m always more impressed when the bride and groom are nervous. It usually shows that they are taking their commitment seriously.

The same is true for parents who are taking the vows and making a commitment in the sacrament of infant baptism. It’s a very serious promise which calls for a thoughtful “yes.” In the early years of my ministry a young couple came to see me in order to make arrangements for having their baby baptized. Before the baptism ceremony, I took the new father aside and asked, “Are you prepared for this solemn event?” “I guess so,” he replied, “I’ve got two hams, pickles, bread, cake and cookies.” “No, no,” I said, “I mean are you spiritually prepared?” “Well, I don’t know,” replied the father thoughtfully, “Do you think two cases of beer are enough?”

The parable then reminds us that God expects when we say “Yes” that it is a responsible “Yes,” one which we intend on following through.

B) The parable reminds us that God is much more interested in our actions, our behavior, in what we really do, than in our promises, our nice words and right beliefs. Remember, the first son said that he would not work in the vineyard, but then later changed his mind and did so anyway, whereas the second son said the right thing, gave the correct answer, made a promise, but ten did absolutely nothing about it. His image was good, but there was only image. Beneath the image, he lived on in his old ways.

God is not much interested in how many promises we make, or how many holy vows we take, or whether we use the right words in our prayers, or how pious we look: God wants to see how we work it out in our everyday living.

In fact, this was typical of Jesus throughout his ministry. He was a man of action who called others to change their ways as they followed him. To his disciples, he said, “Come, follow me!” he didn’t first teach them theology or doctrine or history. They learned their theology and doctrine in practice.

To the woman caught in adultery, he said simply, “Go and sin no more.” To the rich young man who came to him and wanted to know what he must do to find meaning in life and to find God’s kingdom; Jesus said, “Go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and then come and follow me.” To the man who was crippled he said, “Take up your pallet and walk.” In every instance, Jesus called for a change in behavior. When he first met a person, he wasn’t much concerned about right beliefs or correct theology — he knew these would follow in dur course, once the change in behavior was started.

2. Secondly, the parable tells us that sometimes we say “No“ but it turns out to be “Yes.”

Remember the first son in the parable at first rebelled against his father — but later changed his mind and went into the vineyard to work. Jesus is saying here, among other things, that our “no’s", our rebellions in themselves, are not what God finally judges us by.

This is good news because all of us at one time or another have been defiant or rebellious. Many of us have said that we are not going to do something and then have gone ahead and changed our minds and have done it. God understands such actions and accepts us in our rebellion.

Frequently, an individual will say “no” as a way of affirming his or her own individuality. It has been said of children that the first time a child says “no” to his or her parents, that child is saying “yes” to himself or herself. Often, saying “no” is a way of finding ourselves; a way of affirming the fact that we are individuals who are unique while at the same time being connected and interdependent with others.

God is not upset by our saying “no.” In fact, God rather expects it. What god is concerned about is our behavior after the yes or no.

Again, remember in the parable, both sons were addressed, both summoned, both asked to do something. One made the obvious responses of obedience without a hint of resentment or defiance and then didn’t go. He was actually a very weak individual. He didn’t take his father or himself very seriously.

The other son responded with a challenge, a retort, a refusal. But his was a gesture of individuality. And this son also was taking his father very seriously, seriously enough to challenge him. He was in effect saying — "Father, I do not obey automatically like a thing or a machine or a robot. I am a person, an individual.” Once having established that, he made a decision to do what his father said, but it was his decision.

We’ve talked about this before in other sermons — the fact that this affirming of our individuality, of trying to find ourselves begins at a very early age. It begins physically when we are separated from our mother at birth and become a separate entity in the world. And it continues through life.

Thus, we’re familiar with the child who says, “I won’t,” when you tell her to brush her teeth and then she proceeds to brush them secretly. In a sense, the child is saying, “Mom, that’s your idea. When I BRUSH my teeth, it’s going to be my idea,” even though that idea and action agrees with that of the parent. In this gesture of defiance, the child affirms both the parent’s reality and her own reality. And thus, having affirmed her individuality, she can go on and do her parent’s will, only now on a new basis.

It seems to me that often after such an affirming of our own individuality, then we commit ourselves to that action on a new basis. Thus, the first son in the parable went to work in the vineyard not only because he was asked to do so, but because he had made a decision on his own to do so. He said “no” and then changed his mind.

The second son also rebelled but in a hidden way — not openly. Maybe he was afraid to say “no,” but effect said “no” in a sneaky fashion. Perhaps he wasn’t even aware that he was saying no.

3. Thirdly, like many other parables, this one reminds us that in God’s Kingdom there are always surprises. One day we are going to discover that some of the very people we thought would never be in God’s Kingdom are there before us.

Listen again to what Jesus said to the good church people of his time at the end of this parable — "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you.”

The very people we thought were saying “no” to God, are like the first son who repented and went to work in his father’s vineyard. They are the ones who are actually saying “yes” to God; while on the other hand those who seem to be the most religious, who say all the right words, may be like the second son, who quickly said “yes,” but then didn’t follow through.

As in other places, Jesus cautions us not to judge others too harshly or too quickly. The important thing is to be aware of our own “Yes” or “No” and what we mean by it. Amen.