Sunday, September 27, 1987
YES AND NO
Matthew 21:28-32

What is it that causes us human beings to say “Yes” when we mean “No,” and to say “No” when we mean “Yes?” Do we say “Yes” when we want to say “No” because we find it difficult to refuse a request, even though we might not carry through with what we have agreed to do? Sometimes saying “Yes” seems easier.

On the other hand, do we say “No” when we would like to say “Yes” to indicate our individuality and demonstrate that we do not easily accede to requests? We want to show that we have a mind of our own and do not like to take orders from others. We don’t want to appear to be the kind of people who give in too easily. As I look back now on the many times I said “No” to our children, I think many times it was because I didn’t want to appear to be a pushover for their many requests.

The parable just read from the Gospel of Matthew is about two sons, one of whom said “Yes” when he meant “No,” and the other who said “No” when he meant “Yes.”

Before we look at the deeper meaning of the parable and what it has to say to us in our time, we need to pay attention to the background and context of the story.

Jesus had been talking and arguing with the Scribes and the Pharisees — the righteous religious people of his time. They had been especially critical of him and his disciples because of his association with sinners and unbelievers — with the outcasts of society, with prostitutes and tax collectors. Such people did not have the correct theology. Thus they could not possibly do the will of God, nor would God accept them.

To make matters worse, some of these sinners and unbelievers had become followers and even close associates of Jesus. Now there were questions as to whether these recent converts had the right beliefs. Did they have enough Biblical knowledge? Did they know all the laws and rules of religion?

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

The parable has that quality about it. Jesus asks, “What do you think?” We give our answer and then find that we are the ones who are trapped.

This is a parable of both judgment and good news. It contrasts believing and behaving, saying and doing, intentions and actions, when “Yes” means “No,” and “No” means “Yes.”

First, we are going to examine the judgment side of the story. It’s a parable of judgment because it reminds us that God — and other human beings, for that matter — are more interested in our actions, in our behavior, in what we do, rather than in our promises, our nice words, and right beliefs. Remember the first son in the parable said that he would not work in the vineyard, but then later changed his mind and did so anyway, whereas the second son said what he thought his father wanted to hear, said that he would work in the vineyard, made

his promise, but then did nothing about it. In spite of good intentions, he lived on in his old ways.
To put it another way, 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 know the most sophisticated theological language, or how pious we pretend to be — God wants to know how we are working out our faith in our everyday living.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus was a man of action who invited action on the part of those who wanted to follow him. He was an individual who used verbs. To his would-be disciples he said, “Come, follow me.” He didn’t first teach them theology. They learned their theology as they practiced it in action. To the woman caught in adultery, he said, “Go and sin no more.” He didn’t first say, “Look, it’s all a matter of your not having the correct attitude.” To the rich man who came to him and wanted to know what he must do to find eternal life, 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.” He didn’t say, “Let’s think about it; try some positive thoughts, and then in a few days, we’ll worry about perhaps trying to walk again.” In every instance, Jesus demanded a change in behavior. Jesus wasn’t much concerned about right beliefs or correct theology. He knew that...

Here is where this parable becomes one of judgment. For if we’re honest with ourselves, we have to admit that many of us who are in church are quite like the second son in the story, rather than the first. We say to God and to others in many ways, “Yes, I’ll do it.” But then we do not do it. Our saying and our doing are two quite different things. Words come so easily. We know the old saying, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

It’s easy to be very specific in these matters. Think of the many times we say we are sure that we have no prejudice, that we love and respect all people of all kinds of varieties, that we believe that as Christians, we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. It’s easy to make such statements, but then to put them into practice in very specific times and places — that’s another matter.

Or think again of the many solemn promises made in church at the time of infant baptism by the parents, or when we join the church as young people or adults. We then said to God and to others, “I’ll work in the vineyard,” but frequently, like the second son in the parable Jesus told, we have not gone to work at all.

Or think of those many informal promises we make from time to time. We narrowly escape an accident, and we say we are certainly going to change our ways, but do not. Or something good happens to us, and we make a promise that we are going to do some good in response, and that too is forgotten.

In these and in many other ways, the simple story which Jesus told judges us. It judges us when we think of all our high resolves and our intentions but fail in the follow-through. We are reminded that a good beginning with words does not automatically imply a good ending in behavior. The qualities that enable a person to start or say that he or she is going to begin are not the same as those which enable one to carry on unto the end.

This is a parable of judgment — judgment about our religion of words — making religion a mind trip. Like the second son, we are not insincere; we have the best intentions; we try to have the right beliefs. The second son in the story sincerely believed that he was going to work in the vineyard. He wasn’t trying to play games with his father. He just kept putting it off.

The longest, most difficult step in the process of maturity is from dream to deed, from promise to action, from saying to doing, from belief to behavior. As Eliza Doolittle sings in My Fair Lady, “Words, words, words, I’m so sick of words — if you’re in love, show me.”

In this parable, as in a number of other instances, Jesus reminds us that there are going to be some surprises one day when we discover who is in God’s Kingdom. Some of the very people we thought were the worst may be there ahead of those we thought the most religious, including ourselves.

Can you imagine the shocked look on the faces of the very religious people who were listening to Jesus that day when he concluded this parable by stating, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you.”

Remember, many of those in the audience that day were pillars of the church and state, the VIPs of that time. Not only did they think of themselves in such terms, but the great majority of the people thought of them in that way also.

We are reminded that God often sees things differently from the way in which we see them.

But this is also a parable of good news. Remember, the first son in the story at first rebelled against his father but then later repented and went to work in the vineyard anyway.
The story reminds us that rebellion against God in itself is not what God finally judges us by. This is good news because all of us, at one time or another, rebel and are defiant. Most of us have at one time or another said that we are not going to do something and then later have changed our minds and done it anyway. God understands such resistance and accepts us.

As the parent in the parable, God also knows that our defiance, at least some of the time, is related to our attempt to establish our own identity. It is a part of finding ourselves, of determining who we are. I remember reading years ago as a new parent the statement: “The first time your child says ‘No’ to you, she is saying ‘Yes’ to herself.”

This seeking of our identity 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. We search for the ways in which we are distinct from others and for the ways in which we are connected to others.

We’re all familiar with the child who says, “I won’t,” when you tell her to brush her teeth and then she proceeds to brush her teeth secretly. With her “No,” the child is saying, “Dad, that’s your idea. When I brush my teeth, it’s going to be my idea,” even though that idea and action agree with that of her father. In this gesture of defiance, that child affirms both the parent’s identity as a person, a person to whom she can say “Yes” or “No,” and her own identity. Having thus affirmed her own identity, she can go on and still do her parent’s will, only now on a new basis.

For many of us, it seems to be a similar situation in our relationship with God. We want to establish our own identity and at the same time be aware of our connection with God and with others. God accepts us as we go about this process.

The good news of this story is that God does not finally judge us by our little rebellions or our bigger ones, and particularly God does not judge us by what we say or whether or not we have

put our religious beliefs into the correct phrases and the right doctrines. God rather judges us by what our actions are. In another place, Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but those who do the will of God.” Amen.