

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

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Fifteenth Sunday of Pentecost

Philippians 1:1-13  
Matthew 21:23-32

In 1974 Adrienne Rich won the National Book Award in poetry, having beaten fellow nominees Audre Lord and Alice Walker. But when she gave her acceptance speech she shocked the literary community when she began, “We, Audre Lord, Adrienne Rich, and Alice Walker, together accept this award in the name of all women whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world.”

The three women had written the statement together long before the award was announced, agreeing that whoever was the named recipient would read it. They believed that by supporting and sharing it with each other they could enrich each other’s lives and work more than by competing against each other.

Hold on to that story as we consider how the two readings we just heard, orient us toward the Christian life.

It seems our daily lives are a series of yes / no decisions.... Some are inconsequential; others are pretty important. The sons in the reading from Matthew made decisions...

No I won’t work in the vineyard, then yes by going to do it  
Yes I will work, then a no by not going to do it.

And while we quickly identify the first son as having done the right thing – still it’s good to remember that they BOTH didn’t quite get it right – they both missed the mark.

We have the one son who said yes with his words but said no with his actions.  
And the other son said no with his words but said yes with his actions.  
But whether they say yes to God with words or they say yes to God with actions, both these responses are possible because God first said yes to us.

The very act of God becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ - God saying yes to humanity, has been understood and celebrated since the very earliest Christians gathered. Paul’s letter to the Philippians includes a hymn that was sung by the early church in the years right after Christ’s resurrection.

That God would come and breathe and thirst and sweat and bleed and grow tired and feel loneliness and frustration and sadness and fear and all the rest of what we know as human life was the amazing way God said yes to us:

He wanted to know us, and our pain and our struggles  
He wanted to know humanity so much that He would become one of us to feel the suffering firsthand.

But if God had stopped at this point – becoming human just to be one of us – we would not have the good news to share today that we do. Because once God became human in the person of Jesus Christ, Jesus turned right around and said yes to God – Paul says he humbled himself and was obedient to God, even to the point of death on a cross.

So God said yes to humanity in sending Jesus; and Jesus said yes to God when he went to his cross.

Which is remarkable when you think about it. For among the very people who Jesus was trying to save were the ones who cried, “Crucify him!” and the ones who led him up the hill to Golgotha, and the ones who swung the hammer to nail him to the cross.

And yet by bearing the suffering of the crucifixion, the humanity of Jesus said yes to God on behalf of all humanity in a way that we couldn’t do for ourselves. We couldn’t say yes on our own.

Because of this moment, when God said yes to humanity, and Jesus said yes to God, we are now able to say yes to God by accepting Christ’s sacrifice for us and following him. We and Christ together can say yes to God in a way we couldn’t by ourselves. We can say yes to God because God first said yes to us.

Which brings us back to the parable of the two sons – one who said yes with his words, but said no with his actions, one who said no with his words but yes with his actions.

When you joined this church – or any church – you make promises, which are your *yes* with words; and then we live out those promises here in this place. In fact you could say that this is what every Christian ought to be about: to say yes to God with both words and actions. Yes, God I believe in you and Yes I will follow you. And we could say the same about the purpose of the church as a whole.

But when we’re honest with ourselves, we can admit that we miss the mark also, that there is a part of each son in all of us. There are times we say yes to God with our mouth, but we don’t follow through on what we say. And there are times we say no to God with our words, but the Holy Spirit moves in our heart and we do do what God asks of us in the end.

But it’s hard. And as we have seen in the other parables that talk about the Kingdom of God being like a vineyard, when God asks you to come work in the vineyard, you know you’re in for some hard work. Even when we find great joy in the work, it is still a difficult thing to do.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor in Germany who was executed for his resistance to Nazism, spoke of how hard this is when he insisted that the call to the Christian life is that Christ invites a person “come and die.”

We rarely hear that today, do we? Mostly we hear things like “Come get your best life now” and “Come follow me and see how your American dreams can come true.” We are bombarded with messages that hold up our individual and personal well being as the most important thing in life – as the highest value.

But this kind of attitude keeps our faith on the surface as we declare our “blessings” to be our nice homes, happy families, successful businesses or our most recent escape from impending tragedy. Back in 2005, Dr. Christian Smith and his fellow researchers with the National Study of Youth and Religion at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, interviewed more than 3000 American

teenagers. They found that the faith of most teens active in Christian churches could best be described as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” It is summed up with beliefs like these: “God is watching over us from a distance,  
we should be good,  
and the most important thing is for me to be happy / feel good.”

Not quite Bonhoeffer’s “Come and die.”  
Or in Jesus’ words – “pick up your cross and follow me.”  
Or in Paul’s words – “having the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.”

Sometimes I hear people say, "Well that's just his cross to bear," referring to all kinds of suffering...everything from putting up with an overbearing relative to dealing with a debilitating disease.

Because it assumes that THE CROSS is a symbol for any kind of suffering and pain. But the CROSS is not a symbol of generalized suffering.  
It was a symbol of execution, of tortuous execution.

For Jesus to say back in his time "Take up your cross" would be like saying in our time "take up your lethal injection and follow me." So...what in the world does that mean?

Perhaps it is an invitation to discover that good for which you are willing to die...that GOOD for which you would lay down your life...perhaps TAKING UP YOUR CROSS, or as Paul puts it, "being obedient to the point of death" is about doing God's will as we discern it...regardless of the COSTS.

Perhaps "having the same mind that was in Christ Jesus" is the mind that Jesus demonstrated as he struggled in the garden of Gethsemane to figure out what it meant to align his human will with his divine will. That's what Jesus' suffering on the cross was; he was so intent on doing God's good will that he endured the pain of the cross.

You see, the point of our lives is NOT TO AVOID PAIN...neither is it to endure pain for pain's sake. THE POINT OF OUR LIVES IS TO FOLLOW CHRIST...to do the will of God...to CHOOSE LOVE AND JUSTICE AND GOODNESS...and to bear whatever suffering comes in order to bring the Christ-in-us TO LIFE in the world.

I wonder what that means for you.  
I wonder what that means for us as a church that bears Christ’s name.

We are called to have the same mind-set as Christ Jesus had, a mind-set that makes us happy to suffer loss of our own privileges, our own status, our own wealth, so that we lift others up. If we want to live as a followers of Jesus, this is what we are aiming for.

To follow Jesus will not give you wealth, fame, or popularity in this world. Nor will it give you a prize for your impressive spirituality. Because the way of Christ is a mind-set of humility and selflessness.

Remember Adrienne Rich sharing her poetry award with her colleagues?

It is this willingness to lay aside all rights of personal privilege, to submit in the spirit of servanthood to the needs and concerns of others, that is the heart of the Christian faith.

And the passage in Philippians is an illustration of what this Christian citizenship means. And one of the byproducts is a unity that comes from serving God through service to each other. Sure there is danger of selfishly looking out for one's own interests at the expense of others, or of arrogance born of pride in one's status, or achievements (cf. 3:2-11) But the antidote is an attitude of humble commitment to others.

A spirit of self-sacrifice shows others the love of Christ, love that was "obedient unto death, even a cross-death!" And he calls the Philippians and us to follow!

This is definitely not a feel-good religion that does not take its servant role seriously.

Again, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who poured out his own life at the hands of the Nazis, wrote:  
The church is the church only when it exists for others. . . . The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving. . . . It must not underestimate the importance of human example which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus. (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, 2nd ed., 1971, 203-4.)

Unity – having the same love – is the way people who have been graced, live. It is the way a community lives who knows they are NOT God's gift to the world, but who know the gift of grace in Jesus Christ, who know that grace and love never end – and that it is NOT our faith in which we boast – but rather in Jesus Christ.

Paul is preparing the community – the Philippian church and the Groton church – for a new day. He's preparing us stand before God, to live as a community that never gets it right, but is never left alone.

Because we have the Holy Spirit working in our hearts, encouraging us and urging us onward toward more faithful Christian belief and toward more faithful Christian living. And we have other Christians around us to encourage us and help us and hold us to the higher standard to which we have been called.

And certainly this what it is to be the church today – encouraging one another in the ways we say yes to God. Challenging one another to listen more carefully to how God is calling us. Holding one another to a higher standard of faithfulness than we could reach by ourselves.

And throughout the process, we remind ourselves that it isn't really us who encourage one another, but the Holy Spirit who moves within us and among us, lighting fires of excitement for God's kingdom, allowing God's presence to burn within us and to spill out and touch all those around us.

God is calling us right now, inviting us to work in the vineyard.  
Inviting us to say yes to God with our words.  
Inviting us to say yes to God with our actions.  
And always, inviting us to say yes to Him because He has already said yes to us.  
Amen.