

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday, February 28, 2010 based on Matthew 25:34-40.

## Saying Yes to Neighbor

I wonder what Christianity would be like if it were not for the “and.” According to Matthew 22, Jesus was in Jerusalem during the last week of his life on earth when he was asked a question by a religious lawyer. Jesus had been answering questions all day in the temple that day – questions about his authority to teach the things he taught, questions about paying taxes to the Romans or not, and questions about the resurrection, when a Pharisee asked him this question –

<sup>36</sup>“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” The lawyer was asking - of the 613 commandments and laws of the Jewish faith at the time, which one was the most important.

<sup>37</sup>Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” <sup>38</sup>This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

I have often wondered what our faith would be like if Jesus had not spoken the “and.” The lawyer asked for one commandment. Jesus gave him two – one from Deuteronomy 6:5 and one from Leviticus 19:18. In fact Jesus’ second command is only part of verse 18 of Leviticus 19: <sup>18</sup>*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*

But Jesus’ answer was that <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” There are two parts to Jesus “Great Commandment!” Jesus teaches us to have reverence for God and consideration for others.

How different Christianity would be without the “and!” Without the “and” and the second part of the great commandment, our faith would be about piety – about a personal relationship with God centered around complete devotion to an invisible presence. It would be about meditation and inner peace.

But then Jesus said “and – a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus merged two commandments into one great command – love God completely, love neighbor as you love yourself.

I have met quite a few people who do not love themselves very much. I have discovered that it makes it difficult to love others if you do not love or respect yourself. This is why next week you need to come back and hear the third part of my series – “Saying ‘Yes’ to Yourself.” But for now, let’s concentration on the “and.” Let’s talk about “and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Let’s see if this second part of the great commandment of Jesus is secondary to our relationship with God... Well, this identical Great Commandment is listed in Matthew, Mark and Luke. In Luke, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan as part of Great Commandment. The gospel of John does not have this particular saying, but at the last supper Jesus says this in John 13: <sup>34</sup>*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.* <sup>35</sup>*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

I am starting to get the idea that love, compassion, and care toward others was/is an important thing to Jesus. In fact, he seems to base eternal life on it. Today in scripture, we have Jesus’ parable of judgment

day when the Son of Man (him) will come in glory, sit on his throne of glory and divide people between sheep and goats. You heard what happened to the sheep. They were rewarded with heaven and eternal life because they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, took care of the sick, and visited people in prison. And Jesus said, *Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,<sup>□</sup> you did it to me.'*

I think that Jesus is very serious about this compassion to others stuff! I think the "and" of the Great Commandment is very important for our faith and our eternal connection to God. If you go to the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican in Rome, this is how Michelangelo pictured the "judgment of the nations" parable on the ceiling and walls of the chapel. Here's a closer picture.

Robert Voyle, who is an Anglican priest, a therapist, and the inspiration behind this sermon series, writes: *There are three ways to be here in the world. The first is to be here for ourselves. This is when we say Yes! to ourselves without regard for others. This is likely to be very problematic because when our Yes! is at the expense of others it becomes a No! to them. They in turn are likely to think unkindly of our No! and our mutual unkindness will result in indifference, or violence and war.*

*The second way is to be here for others. This is also very problematic because when we say Yes! to our neighbors at the expense of saying Yes! to ourselves we will eventually become exhausted, burned out and cynical... If we try to balance our Yes! to ourselves and Yes! to others we*

*will find ourselves continually torn between two competing demands. There is no peace when we are continually in a state of tension.*

Dr. Voyle proposed a third way that he calls the Priestly Way: *The third way of being in the world is to be here for God. Here our Yes! is based in God's Yes! to us. God's Yes! forms the basis from which we can say Yes! to our neighbor and to ourselves. This is the "priestly way" that St. Peter talks about as the priesthood of all believers. We are all, not just clergy, on a mission from God, and that mission is a priestly mission. At the heart of this priestly way is blessing. But we are not concerned with 'blessing' in a limited religious sense. We are interested in making all of our lives a blessing. If what we are doing is not a mutual blessing to ourselves and others then we need to stop doing it and find something to do that is a blessing. When our toilet breaks, (for example) we don't want to be witnessed to, or have someone pray a blessing over it – neither of these will clean up the sewage on the floor! The real blessing comes from the plumber who repairs the damage and helps clean up the mess. Your priestly way of being in the world is your ministry and it is manifested when what you are doing flows from the gifts God has blessed you with. When we are living purposefully in harmony with ourselves, our neighbor, and God, the Source of our existence, we are living the priestly way. We are invited to have time and consideration for God, our neighbor, and ourselves.*

Well, how do we do that? We can be motivated by political consideration because we perceive that external forces think it is the "right thing to do." Unfortunately, underlying this political motivation is fear – we

do what we do because we are afraid of bad consequences for not doing what is demanded of us. Eventually we will resent what we “have” to do.

Sometimes economics becomes our motivation. We apply a cost-benefit analysis to the event. We think there will be a benefit by doing something – i.e. people will think well of us or we will profit from it. We will do the behavior if we can see that the benefits outweigh the costs. Economic and political reasons are done out of fear or “should-s.”

But let me propose two different motivations that help us living the “and” that are more fulfilling – one is emotional motivation. We do what we do because we find joy or emotional satisfaction from the activity. The motivation is personally pleasurable and has intrinsic reward. For example, we recycle or are conservationist because we appreciate the beauty of the environment and want to leave it better than we found it.

The fourth motivation is spiritual motivation – we do what we do because we cannot not do it. The behavior flows from the depths of our being. We have had a transforming experience, or enlightenment, or being “born again”, or had an awakening that transforms us to different behavior. We do it because the spirit of Christ has transformed how we look at things! Jesus came into our reality to save us, and he saves us both for this world and the next.

To say Yes! to God is to say Yes! to neighbor. They go hand in hand to be a Christian. To be a follower of Jesus is to live the “and.”

So who is our neighbor? The parable of the Good Samaritan says that are neighbor is anyone in need. Well, that is uncomfortable because we see many in need – people without insurance, people without housing,

people without food, people without love, people without hope, people without.

I think we have become quite indifferent and quite individualistic in our society right now. We have narrowed the field of who we see as our neighbor and who we are willing to be concerned about. We have forgotten that Christian love is about compassion and understanding and discovering the reality that our neighbor is anyone in need. When there is a need, we find the way to clothe them, feed them, and help them without burning out or becoming indifferent. A compassionate society not only has individuals who help those in need but has systems in place that shelter, feed, clothe, heal, care. Saying Yes! to neighbor is the result of being transformed by our Yes! to God. That's the Christian way.

The person on the left side of the screen is Bryan Sirchio. Bryan is an ordained minister who is also a musician and songwriter. Bryan was inspired to write a song after listening to the person on the right of your screen. The person on the right is Tony Campolo who had traveled to Haiti to attend a conference about helping the people there. (This was before the recent earthquake.)

Tony tells of going to the restaurant in the hotel of the conference to have dinner during the conference. He was seated at a table next to the window. When the waiter bought his food, children came and pressed their faces against the glass to look at his food. The children were dirty, scrawny, and hungry. The waiter, noticing what was happening, came over and said, "Sorry sir," and pulled down the window shade so Tony could not see the children. Tony said, "He couldn't eat." That window

shade represented what happens so often in life – we don't see or don't want to see what is going on around the world and in our neighborhood. But at that moment, Tony thought of that passage from Matthew 25 when Jesus said when I was hungry you fed me, when I was thirsty to gave me a drink, when I was a stranger you welcomed me, when I was naked you clothed me, when I was destitute, you visited me. And because of that story, Bryan wrote this song – "Jesus is that you in the window –"

Saying yes to neighbor is the joyous result of being transformed by our Yes! to God! Amen.