

October 18, 2015
The National Presbyterian Church
“Say Yes: Join Up!”
Luke 5:1-11; Joshua 24:1, 13-15, 24-25

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In our sermons through the month of October we are thinking together about the importance of saying “yes” to God in a world in which it can be hard to do. Two weeks ago we heard a story Jesus told, which we call the parable of the sower, in which he reminded his listeners that there were many distractions in this world, many difficulties standing between us and a thoroughgoing “yes” to God, stopping us from doing what we want to do, and what we ought to do. Jesus’ intent in telling this parable was, of course, not to discourage people by voicing these difficulties, but to encourage people. That is, although he spoke about a path that was hard, and some rocky ground and some weeds and thorns that would come into our lives to prevent us from being the people that God wants us to be, he also spoke about good soil – which is our calling and his passion for our lives: that we be like good soil, producing a huge harvest of righteousness 30-fold, 60-fold, 100-fold. And this image of good soil and its fruitfulness is, in fact, his pledge to us that as we keep saying “yes” to God, God will make sure that our lives are fruitful, fulfilling, effective, filled with a sense of satisfaction. This is his desire for you and me.

Last week, Donna Marsh followed the same theme as she spoke about our calling as individuals and as a church to say “yes” to God by becoming agents of God’s transformation in this world; saying “yes” to God by reaching out to the world; not just staying inside our own small group but being a part of God’s mission within his world, as individuals and together as a church. The images that Jesus uses to convey this are within his “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5): images of salt and light.

- Salt preserves that which is perishing. Salt gives taste to that which is tasteless. We’ve been called to be salt
- Light and brightens what is dark, opens up a path ahead when you cannot see, gives growth to those things which have become stagnant. We’ve been called to be light.

We’ve been called to be agents of God’s transformation as salt and light in this world. And this is a wonderful calling from God when we say “yes” to God to reach out, and to do so with the assurance that God will indeed help us to become his transformative agents in his world. It’s an amazing calling and amazing hope that stands before us.

An amazing calling and hope – but not always that easy to accomplish: to move from the knowledge of “what we want to do,” and from the passion of “what we want to do,” to actually doing it, to living a new kind of life that God can use in all kinds of ways in the world that he loves and to which he sent his son.

Malcolm Gladwell in his 2008 book, Outliers, speaks of this difficulty when he points out that if you want to become an expert in any particular area or field (and he's covered in his research all kinds of areas and fields) it's going to take an investment of time: a long time. In fact he estimates that on average it's going to take 10,000 hours. Ten thousand hours of concerted effort and you can probably master, and become an expert in whatever it is you want to set out to do. That's 1,258 hour days day after day, to become an expert at something new. It doesn't happen quickly.

And according to Philippa Lally at University College London, just to create a new habit, not to become an expert, but simply to place some activity in your life which becomes fairly automatic and that wasn't there before, it's going to take 66 days on average: 66 days of constant repetition and practice, every day, day after day. Sometimes less, often more, but that's the average she comes up with.

So creating change in our life is rarely quick and rarely easy. And it may seem for us that it's often out of reach – but that would not be the point of either of these authors or of Jesus himself in telling his sower/soil parable. In fact Jesus intent is to say that change is very much within our reach. When God is present by the Holy Spirit change is always possible within our lives, especially if we commit ourselves to taking the first step on the pathway –not the last step, not the fifth step or the tenth step, but the first step on the pathway, a willingness to start, to begin going in the right direction.

Of course a first step provides no guarantee that our lives will in fact change, that they'll become effective, that they'll become fruitful or transformational in the lives of others. There's no guarantee that that will happen. But what is guaranteed is that if we do not take that first step the change that we long for will never happen. The first step is critical, awkward though it may be, frustrating though it may be, time consuming though it may be, costly sometimes though it may be; that first step is absolutely critical. And usually not too hard or impossible.

So think, for example, of a long term endeavor in which lives are changed and changed dramatically for good. Think about children and parenting, for example. Think about our children living fruitful and effective lives, and the parental decision (which we take for granted these days as a 'right') that the best way for them to become effective in life is to ensure that they have an education. Elementary school, middle school. High school, college! When we think about the whole thing it becomes daunting, an impossible mountain to climb. Twelve years of school. And then college. And then graduate school! So our children end up spending not just 12 or 16 years, but 20 years or more studying, year after year, in order to be the kind of person we want them to be, that God wants them to be; an effective person in this world in which we live.

For a parent of a five year old, to think of this length of time is daunting. But in fact a parent doesn't have to really think at that "beginning moment" about all of the other steps along the way. Just the first step. The first day of school, and then the next day! Just start somewhere along the line. Show up. Join in with others. You have to go to the school building. You have to enter a new atmosphere which you may look at other people around about you and say to

yourself “I’m out of my comfort zone, all these other parents seem to know what they’re doing but I don’t feel as if I know what I’m doing at all.” You have to fill in forms of one kind or another. Parental consent forms, student forms, medical forms, field trip forms, and it may all seem too much. But it’s not really. None of it is beyond the scope of our ability. Awkward, inconvenient, time consuming with a check to write here or there along the way. But every single one of us can take these steps. And if we just grit our teeth and do it, then what we discover is that day one gives way to day two and day three and day four, and the years go by and the transformation, a remarkable transformation takes place in young lives step by step, day by day. – But there would be no step by step, day by day, no step two or three or four, if you didn’t begin with step one: a step fully within our ability, quite possible, even if at first we feel awkward or difficult taking it.

Or think about marriage – an institution which is clearly going to change two lives. You find somebody who becomes so important to you that you’re no longer content to be who you were. And for this person you’re willing to change your legal status. You’re willing to change your home address. You’re willing to change your economic situation. You’re willing to allow children and adults into your lives who weren’t in your lives before and conversations are going to take place within that new environment which will shape you in ways that you could never have imagined. The whole enterprise, if you look at it all at once, is a perhaps a daunting prospect, a process of life-long change which, though, like so many other things, begins with a first step which is manageable . . . unless we make it unmanageable (and we have an ability to do that, so the simple steps expand and then get out of hand!). It begins with an engagement and then a wedding. We find a date that is set for the wedding. Family and friends are invited. The ceremony and the reception are planned. Nothing really hard about that. Inconvenient, perhaps, time consuming, certainly; at times, even bothersome (well, to the groom!) But not impossible, step at a time, beginning with the first step. And in this case, important not only because it starts the journey, but starts the journey on the right foot!

- Deliberately acknowledging that God is present in the new relationship.
- Making time and space for love and joy to be expressed publicly by a couple and their family and friends.
- Making public vows which are going to be remembered and held onto – for better, for worse, for rich or for poor, in sickness or in health, loving and cherishing one another so long as we both shall live.

Step one. Not impossible. Perhaps a little awkward and bothersome at times. But step one leads to step two and three and four; and when step one is done correctly, when we pay attention to those details taking the right step-one becomes an integral part, in fact, of making it through steps three, four and five and on to 35 and 45 and 55, all the way down the line.

Step one. It’s the beginning of something else. It doesn’t guarantee that there will be “something else” but it’s critical that it’s there, and that in any new endeavor we think not just

about the length of the “long haul” toward transformation, but about the manageable first step on the path.

The same is true when it comes to saying “yes” to God, and being transformed into the kind of people that God wants us to be in our relationship with God. Our gospel story in Luke 5, about Jesus ‘call to the first disciples, speaks about the different steps taken they took on a pathway which would lead to their personal transformation, and then to the transformation of the world, and, in time, to the transformation of your life and my life today. It’s tempting as we read the story to think that the first step that was taken that led to transformational change in the lives of the disciples, and especially in the life of the disciple Simon Peter, was the step when he left his fishing boat behind and left his livelihood behind and followed Jesus. Remember these words at the end of our passage?

“Jesus said to Simon Peter, do not be afraid. From now on you’ll be catching people.” [Not just fish but people. I’m going to change your life]. “When they brought boats to shore they left everything and followed him.”

It’s quite a step. A momentous step, a transformational moment. But what I think is important to notice in this scripture is that that step was not really the first step that Simon Peter took. And for me this is good news. That step (leaving the boat behind and following Jesus; leaving his very livelihood behind and following Jesus) was an enormous step, which if I were to ask it of you – “this is what you have to do to say ‘yes’ to God” – I would hazard a guess that I may not have too many takers. It’s so huge, so big! Too big! The good news is that what we find as we read the story is that wasn’t the first step that Jesus asked Simon Peter to take; that there was in fact another step which came first, and that enabled him to take step two and three, and four and five, all the way down the line to the end.

When we read the story carefully we find that there is an initial step or two which were inconvenient and awkward and cost Simon Peter time and energy but which were quite manageable. A step or two that he took, that set him going in this completely new direction, toward a fruitful and effective life for Christ. Let me go back to the story and read it again. The first step has to do with Simon Peter allowing Jesus to invade his space and enter his boat; and then allowing Jesus to make him do something which at first he didn’t want to do, but which he knew how to do, and which, when he “gave in and did it,” was the first step to allowing Jesus to control the direction of his life. So here is the story again (Luke 5):

Once while Jesus was standing beside the Lake of Geneseret (more commonly known as the Sea of Galilee) and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, Jesus saw two boats there at the shore of the lake. The fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Jesus got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowd from the boat. When he had finished speaking he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master we’ve worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so I will let down the nets.”

[You can almost see Simon Peter rolling his eyes here, as if to say ‘You know nothing about fishing. You come from Nazareth up in the hills. I’m a fisherman. I do this all my life. Who do you think you are trying to reshape, to reorganize my life? We’ve been out all night. There is nothing out there, I know best.’ But instead of saying that, though it sounds as if he thought that, he says, ‘Okay. I’ll do it. You’re in my boat. I’ll take the next step and we will go out.’ And what we read in Verse 6 is this]

When they had done this they caught so many fish that their needs were beginning to break so they signaled their partners in the other boats to come and help them and they came and filled both boats so they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it he fell down at Jesus knees saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” For he and all who were with him were amazed [they were in awe, they were awestruck] at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee who were partners with Simon. Then [and this is where step two comes into the picture] Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid from now on you will be catching people.” [I’ve got something different for you to do that you hadn’t thought about before and you will be fruitful and effective in this]. When they had brought their boats to shore they left everything and followed him.

But that wasn’t step one. That’s step two. Step one was to do let Jesus enter and take charge in the boat! Awkward and inconvenient, something that at first they didn’t want to do; quite possible though; quite within the reach of Simon Peter and the others. But not what he wanted: Peter was the one who knew about boats. “Just go out into the deep. Go out into the deep and do it again,” says Jesus. But, says Peter, “I don’t want to do that. I’ve been there. I’ve done that. I’m tired!” To which Jesus says, “Just do it. You can do it, can’t you?” “Well, yes!” And he did. Step one. And step one led to the awe and the wonder, that made step two possible – the sense that the one speaking and commanding, the one who was in the boat with him, was more powerful than he could ever begin to imagine; perhaps even the Lord, the creator of the universe! Somehow, not just his carpenter-friend from the hills of Galilee, but someone who had more power than he could conceive, and knew more about fishing than he did, knew more about his life than he could at first have ever begun to imagine – this was the one in the boat with him! Asking him (and surely able to provide the ability) to take step two . . . and all the steps to follow.

Step one, doable. Easy to do. Not that we want to do it. But not hard at all. Without which, though, there would be no step three or four or five or 35 or 45 or 55.

It’s important for us to remember what God wants to do in our lives, how the gospels speak so frequently of ordinary lives being caught up in the great plan of God, what we call the Kingdom of God. And when we are caught up in the Kingdom our lives can become more effective and fruitful than we ever imagined. God wants our lives to be fruitful. God wants our lives to be productive and effective in his service and it’s important to think of that and all the changes that have to take place for that to happen. But this morning what I really want us to

remember and take away is the message of that first step. And for you to ask what that first step is for you.

Sometimes when we think about this big picture it's so enormous that we can never imagine getting there; so hard, so long a path. But here we have a story of step one, of someone saying 'yes' to God, beginning with a simple step, not at first wanted, but the right step that leads in the course of time to a simple life becoming more powerful and effective in God's service than we could have begun to imagine.

So what are these steps in our lives? What might they look like? Well I'd suggest they might look like this: a few brief examples.

- One has to do with perhaps setting our alarm clock 15 minutes earlier than its set right now. Now I'm tempted to ask how many of you are not capable of setting your alarm clock? How many of you don't like to set your alarm clock? That's what I'm getting at: We may not like to do it; it may be awkward or difficult – but it's not intrinsically hard or impossible. But 15 minutes can change a life when we say "I will do that and I will spend the first 15 minutes of the day with God." But we say "Well I've never prayed." It seems so impossible to live a life of prayer. True! But don't start with that thought. Just begin with opening your mouth and saying, 'Father I haven't spoken to you in a while. Let me share with you what's going on in my life and what bothers me in this world of yours.' And the conversation can move on from there.
- Or maybe what we need to do this first step is to find a quiet place in our house or some other place where nobody will bother us for a few minutes. That's an important step to take and it's not beyond the grasp of any of us.
- Or simply to read the announcements in the bulletin and say "You know, this is something I've never been to before but maybe I can go again." There's no obligation to go a second or a third or a fourth time but one thing is for sure – unless we go once, take a first step, there never will be a second or a third or a fourth time.

Each of these things can be awkward or frustrating and we say "I don't want to be put in that position" (like a child or parent on the first day of school). But in God's economy that is how, so often, great change, significant change begins to happen. Through a simple step that any of us can take, which at first, for whatever reason, we don't want to take, and feel uncomfortable taking, but which, we have a sneaking suspicion, God through Jesus is nudging us to take. Take it. Take it, say 'yes,' and let God open a new door to what will follow.

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