



“Yes and No”

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:33-37

February 12, 2023

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Texts: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:33- 37 (*The Message*)

Yes and no, the crucial means to forming and communicating the choices we make. In that case it's usually yes or no, though there is "I'm not sure. Maybe. Let me think about it." When I was looking for images related to today's texts, I found several of them were humorous versions of "yes, no, and maybe," leaving room for the undecided. But there are times in life when we really must decide. Yes and no are the only options, the only choices available. I'm reminded of the poster that adorned the walls of many a college and seminary dorm room back in the 1960s, "Not to decide is to decide." There are always consequences to the choices we make, even when we don't make them actively or intentionally.

The passage from Jewish scripture read this morning comes near the end of the book of Deuteronomy. That means it comes near the end of the Torah itself. The law has been laid out; the terms of the treaty between God and God's people made clear; the guidelines, rules, and regulations for building up, sustaining and guiding God's people written down. Now the old prophet, Moses, stands before them one last time, exhorting the people, "I call heaven and earth

to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Holy One your God, both obeying, and holding fast to God...”

Now we can spend our time wrestling with the system of rewards and punishments implied in this proclamation, but I like the way David Lose summarizes the intent of the old exhorter. Lose says, “First, the law is given always as a gift...God’s gift to help us get more from this life.” He continues by observing that the law is “given after God has already declared that Israel is God’s people. This means the law is not the means by which to become God’s people or to earn God’s love, but rather a gift given to God’s people because God loves them.” He also reminds us that “the law comes as a gift to strengthen community by orienting us to the needs of our neighbor” (David J. Lose, “On Love and the Law, February 6, 2017,” davidlose.net).

This is good news, I think, for any of us taught to see God as an almighty, all-knowing, punitive parent, just waiting for us to mess up so he could pounce on us and administer the penalty we deserve. Yes, the loving parent has rules and regulations but at their best they are in service of our welfare and the well-being of the family. Remember that Jesus is actually quoting from the Torah when he says the law is summed up in those two great commandments – whole-hearted love of God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and neighbor (Leviticus 19:18).

Lose tells a story from Frank’s childhood. The eight-year-old boy had gotten into a disagreement with his younger sister. Unfortunately, the disagreement escalated as those things are wont to do. It grew to the point where Frank was about to pummel his sibling. Having pinned her down, with fist raised to strike, his mother suddenly entered the room, enjoining him to stop immediately. An angry Frank turned to his mother and flashed, “She’s my sister. I can do anything I want to her.” At which point mother swooped across the room, towering over him, proclaiming forcefully, “She’s my daughter – no you can’t!”

A God image? Lose summarizes, “That’s the law: God’s gift to protect and care for God’s children.” The attentive mother hen, the soaring mother eagle, the fierce mother bear, all determined to care for her young. Lose says, “I know we at times feel the negative impact or threat of the law, but it is because God cares so deeply about God’s children...all of God’s children. ‘No, you can’t hoard everything. No, you can’t discriminate and exclude. No, you can’t violate and exploit. Because she is my daughter, and he is my son.’” And they are my beloved child.

This God-given law has to do with that old-fashioned notion of righteousness, what I like to interpret as right-living. It’s not so much a legal code as a guidebook for living in the ways God intended when God brought us into being. That’s why Jesus addresses the law by overriding some of its rules when they no longer serve the well-being of humanity at the same time intensifying others because he sees them as crucial to the welfare of the community and its

members. Remember, he tells his listeners that the law was made to serve humankind not humankind the law.

“Say yes to life,” the great lawgiver and old prophet urges. Embrace God’s guidelines. They really are life-giving. Say no to everything that is life-denying. This is God’s way. In case you didn’t get it the first few times it was all laid out for you, here comes Christ to dwell among us and show us that way in his life and ministry. Here’s one small example. “...don’t say anything you don’t mean...You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, ‘I’ll pray for you,’ and never doing it, or saying, ‘God be with you,’ and not meaning it. You don’t make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong.”

Now, there’s a little lesson we might all take to heart. Will God send us to hell if we dissemble? If we shave a little off the truth or embellish it just a touch? If we try to manipulate the situation to our own advantage? If we get caught up in creating alternative facts that support a particular perspective we’re trying to sell? I don’t think God is going to send us to hell...well, mostly because I don’t believe in hell. But then, the chances are good we’ll experience a little hell of our own making when we shape the truth to serve our self-interests. There’s something about plain spoken honesty that tends to work, not only for the good of the soul, but for the good of the community. “Yes and no are very powerful words.” Live so that you “mean them when you say them and respect them when you hear them.” The world will be a better place and you will be a better person.

I keep coming back to the Hymn text by Dutch writer Anders Frostenson,

“Your love, O God is broad like beach and meadow, wide as the wind and our eternal home. You leave us free to seek You or reject You, And give us room to answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

We long for freedom where our truest being Is given hope and courage to unfold. We seek in freedom, space and scope for dreaming And look for ground where trees and plants can grow.

O judge us Lord, and in Your judgement free us, And set our feet in freedom’s open space; Take us as far as Your compassion wanders Among the children of the human race.

You will know and say and do the truth and the truth will set you free.

When I think of making right choices and choosing right living, I think of a very moving story from my archive. A few years back this one ran in the Los Angeles Times. At the time, I posted the story on my Facebook page as a powerful witness to one who chooses to do the right thing, to commit to righteous life. The story involved a large, burly man with a shaved head and a bushy

black beard.

The man was Mohamed Bzeek, a Muslim who lived in Azusa, California. He was a man who could easily be seen as intimidating. This was a time when we were being told repeatedly that all Muslims should be suspected of and given extreme vetting for their inherent terrorist tendencies. Mohamed Bzeek looked like a man who would certainly come immediately under suspicion. The mantra was that as a devout Muslim, overtly or secretly, he was out to destroy all us infidels, yes?

Only this prejudiced perspective, this set of alternative facts, couldn't have been further from the truth. The reason Mohamed Bzeek was featured in the LA Times that day was an extraordinary life choice he had made. Due to his devout Muslim faith, he had chosen to let compassion shape his life. The headline for the article read, "I KNOW THEY ARE GOING TO DIE.' THIS FOSTER FATHER TAKES IN ONLY TERMINALLY ILL CHILDREN" (LA Times, February 8, 2017). The headline alone stopped me in my tracks. This man was not only a devout Muslim but also a Libyan immigrant. The article opened with these lines which will give you the flavor of the story:

The children were going to die.

Mohamed Bzeek knew that. But in his more than two decades as a foster father, he took them in anyway — the sickest of the sick in Los Angeles County's sprawling foster care system.

He has buried about 10 children. Some died in his arms.

Now, Bzeek spends long days and sleepless nights caring for a bedridden 6-year-old foster girl with a rare brain defect. She's blind and deaf. She has daily seizures. Her arms and legs are paralyzed.

Bzeek, a quiet, devout Libyan-born Muslim who lives in Azusa, just wants her to know she's not alone in this life.

"I know she can't hear, can't see, but I always talk to her," he said. "I'm always holding her, playing with her, touching her...She has feelings. She has a soul. She's a human being.

My question in posting this moving article was, "How many Christians could or would do what this devout Muslim foster father does daily?" I don't mean for my question to sound snarky, but I honestly don't think I have the compassion or stamina to do what this man does daily. Nor would most people of faith I know. Would you? Perhaps a better question is what each and all of us

together do to say yes to life and commit ourselves to making more life available to those in need of a little life support.

The word still comes to us, “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Holy One your God, both obeying, and holding fast to God...” How ironic that Mohamed Bzeek’s choosing life means that sick children die with dignity. “I will arise and go to Jesus; he will embrace me with his arms. In the arms of my dear Savior, oh! there are ten thousand charms.”

“Just say ‘yes’ and ‘no,’” as the situation demands, as God instructs, as Christ leads, as the Spirit empowers. “Yes and no are very powerful words. Mean them when you say them. Respect them when you hear them.” Mohamed Bzeek not only means them when he says them; he means them when he lives them. We need to respect those powerful words when we hear them uttered in Mohamed’s devotion and lived out in the life choices he has made. May his witness inspire us to do likewise. Amen.