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Telling God “No”

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Have you ever said “no” to God? Was there ever a time in your life when you felt God was calling you in a certain direction, nagging at you to do something or say something to a person or group of people and you just didn’t do it? It’s not as unusual as you might think for even the most faithful intentioned followers of God to say no.

Moses said no to God initially, when God first spoke to Moses out of that bush that seemed to be a fire and yet not burning. We might remember from that story that while Moses’ first response was no, God did not end the conversation with Moses’ no, God kept going. Some might interpret that encounter as saying God wore Moses down.

Jonah said no too. If you are familiar with the story of Jonah, you will remember God didn’t let Jonah’s no be the end of their conversation either.

A little closer to home, I said no to God for years. I was quite certain God was calling me to the priesthood, but that call went against my family’s beliefs. I knew saying yes to God might have a high cost. I was not sure what saying yes would mean for me, where it would lead me. But, while God let me say no all I wanted, God did not give up calling. And like in the stories from the Bible, God was not above using whatever it took to keep God’s call difficult to avoid.

What was perhaps most unsettling about my story is that I used the church itself to say no to God. I was a vestry member. I was director of Christian formation. I was on the Diocesan Standing Committee. And I used all that to justify my no. I can recall one very powerful day when I was praying, when I got snarky and arrogant with God in my prayers and told God that one particular Sunday had been a very good one, especially in the Sunday school, and I told God how I could sense the presence of the Holy Spirit, and how the children and adults had felt the love of God and, in my arrogance, I told God I didn’t need to be a priest to do what God was calling me to do.

One of the things I absolutely love about God is that God is not intimidated, impressed, or distracted by immaturity, agendas, or things like that. As soon as I had uttered that arrogant prayer, God responded in a way I have heard God before, with words that are heard but not uttered the way we speak words. The words from God were, “Deborah, they all need to feel my love.” And I knew in that moment what God meant. I was not happy to be shut down so quickly. God didn’t even give me one second to bask in my own glory.

But I knew then I couldn't say no much longer. I knew I would have to follow where I was being led, because I knew that one day, after my life on this earth is over, I will face my maker, the author of not only my life but all life, and give an account of how I lived the life I was so generously given. And I really did want to say yes to God, I was just scared, and that, obviously, was overcome.

You might say saying NO to God is a Biblical tradition. One that surfaces in the scriptures every now again. Most notably in the parable Jesus told in Matthew's Gospel today where we heard two sons respond to their father's request to go and work in his vineyard. At first glance, this parable might simply be about actions speaking louder than words, but it may be deeper than that.

The son who said yes but didn't follow through reminds me of the time I was saying no to God by saying yes to a lot of church responsibilities and hiding behind those responsibilities to avoid God. So, while I looked like a very good church goer, I was actually using the church to say no. In that way, I looked a lot like the son in the parable who said yes but meant no.

Even the religious leaders in Matthew's Gospel recognized the son who said no but changed his mind and did what he was asked was the one who did the will of the father. And while many commentators remind us we don't know what made the son change, I wonder if it had to do with the issue the author of Matthew's Gospel brings up in the section of the Gospel we just heard: authority.

Authority is one of those potentially controversial issues in our modern world, and questioning authority is a normal thing to do. In fact, we need to do so, especially when we come across what looks like news articles on social media or even the news programs on the TV or radio. We need to question on what authority someone speaks, if they actually have the experience or office to speak to the topic at hand. If a study is quoted we need to check to make sure that was an actual study backed up with research and review. Many of us have learned we can't afford to take everything we read or hear at face value, and while that might sound cynical, it is unfortunately true. We even have to check to make sure people who say they have certain degrees or experiences actually do. It's a lot of work, keeping an eye on authority.

So maybe we can see some sense in the chief priests and the elders questioning Jesus' authority in today's Gospel, as that is simply a modern reality for us. Very often, the religious leaders get cast as the "bad guys" in the Gospels, and they certainly represent the religious power and authority of Jesus' day. Historians remind us that part of why the chief priests and elders get a bad reputation is that there was some cooperation between the religious leaders and the Roman empire that allowed the

religious leaders to function without Roman interference as long as the religious leaders did their part to keep their people in line. This upset the some of the people of Jesus' time, as they felt the religious leaders were being more faithful to Rome and the power it gave than to God.

The section of Matthew's Gospel we heard today, takes place after Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey with people shouting and praising God and after Jesus overturned the money changer's tables in the temple. So while some might see the religious leaders' question to Jesus about whose authority he was operating under as a threat to their power, from their point of view, it is perhaps fair to question Jesus' unusual behavior. So when Jesus turned the question back on them, it may have been a clever way to trap the chief priests and elders into facing their own corruption, but in this Gospel it will be part of what will lead to Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion, as a way for those in power, the authorities of the day, to put down and silence the one who threatened their power.

But we all know the rest of the story, how Jesus rose three days after his crucifixion because Jesus didn't just speak truth to power, Jesus is the love of God, and that is the authority from which he acted.

In the parable Jesus told, that may be why the son who said no eventually did what his father asked him, because his father didn't chastise the no, didn't act violently or throw his son out of his house. He let his son say no, and perhaps the son had the same reaction the people Jesus mentioned, those tax collectors and prostitutes had, that because they had been allowed to say no and Jesus reminded them God still loves them, they were not cast out they could later say yes to God. Because God's authority is love, not the controlling, manipulating love that is quick to hurt, to criticize, to threaten, but the love that is willing to be rejected, to wait, and doesn't give up; the love that welcomes us in despite our no and rejoices in our obedience. It was that authority that helped me change.

That's good news for all of us, and most especially for those of us who say no, whether it is in word or deed. It means God gives us time to work through why we say no, and it means God doesn't let our no be the end, just part of a longer conversation. Which may also be helpful for us when we receive a no when pursuing what we believe is a Godly call; that the no may not be an end, just an opportunity for us to keep the conversation going. It also allows us the freedom to discern if the calling we might be experiencing is from God or not, and to question the authority of the calling, to reflect on whether or not it looks like God's love revealed in Christ.

This is especially important at a time when the church many of us have grown up in or found a home in is facing challenges, and some of these challenges may actually be God calling us to find new ways to be true to our faith while sharing God's love with our neighbors near and far, known, and unknown. These challenges might seem as frightening as I originally found my calling, but we have the best thing to help us through: we have God's love which is big enough and powerful enough to withstand our saying no, and hangs in there with us.

So, the next time we find ourselves saying no, it might be a good opportunity to reflect on why, and to whom we are really saying no, and look deeper to see if God might be in the midst of the situation, calling us to follow God into something new, something that will help bring God's love to all people.