

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 8, 2018

Text: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Theme: “No to Know”

“Which part of “no” don’t you understand?” No does seem pretty straightforward does it not? It only has two letters, one syllable, follows the rules phonetically. “No,” “not wanted,” “not allowed,” “not necessary,” “ain’t goin’ happen!” But, it could be we don’t want to take no for an answer. It is really something that is desired. It seems that it could be helpful; maybe it’s necessary. It’s the reasonable thing. No to this no, we are persistent in pursuing in hopes of persuading to turn no to yes.

We all can relate to this. It is not a difficult concept. We’ve been on both ends of the no tug-of-war. Will the no prevail or will we keep after it and somehow pull a yes out in the end? Paul had been on both ends of that rope. He learned and grew on the “no” end. In 1st and 2nd Corinthians he is addressing some of the no’s of his listeners, that would be the listeners in 1st century Corinth and we pew sitters of the 21st century. There are some yeses in God’s no’s, God’s transforming work.

Our text for today in chapter 12 continues Paul’s defense of his apostleship that started back in chapter 10:1. The defense is not to defend his person for vindication, but for the sake of the hearing of his message. In chapter 11 he has gone in detail concerning his sufferings as an apostle. Could those super apostles present such a resume? Now he moves into visions and revelations, vision of being caught up into paradise and hearing words that one is not allowed to speak. He says such a person has something to boast about, but he won’t and doesn’t. Instead he moves on to the subject of this thorn in the flesh.

Such a thorn was a pointy object and Paul was the object of its pointiness. The evil one was on the pushing end, “a messenger of Satan to harass me.” (vs 7) Paul says it was so he wouldn’t get too uppity from his visions and revelations. It’s hard so he asks God to take it away, see that it was pulled out. God said, “no.” Paul asked again and the same answer came. He asks a third time and receives the same “no” answer. Now I would assume this took place over a period of time, not “Lord, please remove this thorn.” “No.” “Oh, please knock Satan away and pull it out.” “No.” “Lord, please.” “What part of no don’t you understand.” It was probably an ongoing struggle.

Paul surely did not ask flippantly or thoughtlessly, but in sincerity and earnestness. This thorn was distracting, could even be hindering him in his mission. After all, it was Satan and it was Satan’s delight to see Paul suffer and to see the work of the apostle attacked. The answer to removal was no.

Paul’s hearers, like Paul, knew nos. There would have been thorns in Corinth. They were not immune to life’s sticky and prickly problems. There would have been infirmities, disabilities, and disease. There would have been bruised and broken relationships. They would know hard times where perhaps someone had said no or performed no actions regarding one’s value as a servant or employee. Now we also know those pointy ends. None of that has changed in the almost 2000 years since. Yes, as far as daily life we know much more creature comforts that make so many things easier, but thorns are still around. If Satan is the instigator why would God not say “yes” to the removal? When God does say “no” we are not happy and maybe not prepared to accept it. Do we say no to God’s no?

There was some other no’s to God’s no going on at Corinth. Some were saying no to God’s no commandments. Paul was calling them to repent. He did so in his first letter,

certainly would have done so in his “painful” visit. Some were saying no to his admonishing. He speaks of coming and finding some still caught up in quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit and disorder (12:20). He referred to those who had sinned and not repented of impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality (12:21) The unrepentant were saying no to God’s nos.

Is that not quite common in our age, even prevalent? In a world view with God missing we are just transient, passing through. The thought of those “in the know” is that we have passed through periods of ignorance and limited knowledge that produced those confining and restricting nos. “No,” the contention is, “we are not bound by moral codes or anatomy or even biology. “No, such restrictions are just not going to work on an enlightened person such as I.” It’s easy to point the finger out there (the direction of the previous statements) and not in here (in this space of our building) or even in here (in the heart).

Yes, it is no to no, God’s no, and no to know any differently as revealed by God. ‘I do not want to be told I’m wrong. I don’t want to change. I don’t want to consider any no for knowing how I need to change.’ It’s no to no and just pushing ahead. After a while all those no’s of the commandments are like so many splats of the bugs on your windshield driving through the Delta at night. It’s annoying but you grow used to it, begin to think of the mess and smear as normal. Those intent on ignoring the no’s can find some yes sayers to validate their no’s to God. In Corinth it would have been those super-duper apostles. In our culture, including within churches, you can find such yes sayers to the nay sayers of God’s nos.

It would be bad, will be bad, for those hearing God’s no on the last day. Our OT lesson is from Ezekiel. Ezekiel worked among those who were exiled to Babylon from

Judah. The exile had happened as most were saying no to God's no. They were experiencing the consequences of their rebellion. Now God calls Ezekiel to work among them. He tells Ezekiel whether they would listen or not they would know a prophet had been among them (Ezekiel 2:5). How tragic it would be to stay on that not listening track. The end of the line would not be good.

In our Gospel lesson we see those who did not listen, who said no to The prophet. Look what they were missing. There would be more no's from those in Capernaum, Bethsaida, Corinth, Ephesus, and Antioch. Will it be so in Jonesboro? It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, to hear the final no. "I never knew you."

God's no comes so we may know, know His will, His grace, His strength. God told Paul there was a reason He was allowing Satan to harass him. 'Paul, Satan, means you harm. I'll use it for your good and for the good of those you serve. No, I won't stop Satan from sticking you on this one. It's so you can say "yes" to this. "MY grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (vs 9) Yes, Paul said yes to God's no. "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest on me...for when I am weak, then I am strong." (vs 9, 10)

You and I, yes, by the Spirit's working, we say yes to God's no. We do so to His commands as creatures to the Creator, as child to Father, as redeemed to Redeemer. We say yes to His lordship over all paths of our lives including those baffling, buffeting, and even battering events. It is the yes of faith to God's no, the yes of faith and hope.

Yes, it is God's no so that we may know. It's so we may know our proper and beneficial size. Paul gave some verbiage to his "foolish" boasting to show he was not inferior to those super apostles. He defends his character and his apostleship but not to exalt self, no, as he says later in chapter 12, "and all for your upbuilding beloved." (vs 19)

Paul doesn't do so that he might be looked upon as the one to be looked upon. The goal was not Paulites, but Christians. So Paul says he refrains from boasting that he might not so be exalted or be tempted to exalt himself. And then Satan and his pointy thorn, all to point away from any reliability on his own strength and ability and to be pointed to God's.

God's no to us is so we may know Christ. Christ is the One who knows us like no other. He became one of us. He knew insults (as we see in His own home town today, Mark 6:1-6), hardships, persecutions, and calamities. Satan certainly did his best to do his worst against Jesus. So Jesus, this perfect, sinless, holy Son of God is betrayed, and condemned, and scourged, and crucified. He endured what appeared to be the weakness and the foolishness of the cross. But it was the strength and the wisdom of God. Yes, He is The Prophet, God's message of Himself. His is the perfect life, and fully atoning sacrifice, and the total victory over death by the resurrection.

God has made Himself known in Jesus. We hang on to Christ, know Him, through faith. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:11, "You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." It's for me, Luther wrote⁸ in the Small Catechism, purchased and won me a lost and condemned creature from sin, death and the power of the devil. God's no of the law is so that we may know we are sinners, to point us to His yes of the Gospel. In Jesus we are new creatures, God's workmanship to do His will, those who say yes to His directing.

Those who know Him in faith have the promise of being known by Him on the day of the revelation of Jesus. Oh to hear the words on that day, "well done good and faithful servant." "You are my forgiven and perfect child. Come in to the banquet hall." We who by the power of the Spirit say yes to God are His servants right now. We are known by others to be such as we walk in light of God's Word. By God's grace and strength others

will know God's love through our service to them even when they are not in the position and/or the mood to reciprocate.

Paul wanted His original listeners and us to know what he knew. Our strength and sufficiency is always weak and insufficient. God's no can bring us to see that. God's no comes so that we may know the might and blessing of His YES. For Jesus' sake. Amen