

**October 8, 2017**

**TEXT: Matthew 21:23–32**

**TITLE: No More Mixed Messages**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Two sons are asked the same thing by their father: “Please go work in the vineyard today.” One says “Yes” and doesn’t work; one says “No” but later changes his mind and does work. Jesus’ parable is shaped around mixed messages—a “Yes” that was actually a “No” and a “No” that in the end proved to be a “Yes.” Mixed messages are all around us. They are the people who say “I’ll call” but who never get back to us; the folks who get an invitation in the mail but never RSVP; they are the men and women in relationships who say “I like being with you but I need my space”; they are the governments that insist they justly sentence people to capital punishment when in reality everyone knows that “those without the capital get the punishment.”

Mixed messages shouldn’t be so hard to stop. Halfway through his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said “Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one” (Matthew 5:37). And in the book of James, it says, “Let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation” (James 5:12). So keep your word. Say what you mean. It doesn’t seem like a difficult lesson to learn. Yet mixed messages persist and are all around us. Businesses may say they are an equal opportunity employer, but we know that is not true. Churches may have on their signboards “All are welcome here” but the rhetoric outside often doesn’t match the reality inside.

Earlier this week I wore my clerical collar, something I only rarely do. But I was going down to the City-County building for a court hearing and it was important that I be immediately recognizable as a member of the clergy. Several other pastors were there. A man named José Luis was appearing before a judge in order to be granted sole custody of his two young daughters. The mother was not in the picture at all, so his temporary custody was about to be made full custody. It should have been a celebratory day, except for the fact that the two little girls were both born here and thus American citizens, while José Luis was an undocumented resident. I was there to escort this caring father from the court so that Immigration officials couldn’t potentially arrest him in front of his daughters on the very day he was granted full custody of them. He was granted custody; then we whisked him down a back staircase to a waiting car to avoid another American mixed message: *Thank you for caring for your family; you’re under arrest to be deported so your children will be sent to foster care.*

Why do people say “Yes” but then their actions say “No”? We’re all guilty of this. We get busy and forget to return phone calls. We tell the telemarketer to send us material in the mail but we never send a contribution back to them. Lots of times we say “Yes” in order to save face, to fit in and not disappoint people whose opinion we value. The one son likely told his father “Yes” out of good motives and wanting to do what was right in that moment. But a “Yes” without being followed by work in the vineyard had little value and only made things worse.

Mixed messages are often tied to secrecy and shame. We want people to think the best of us, so we say “Yes, I’m doing fine” when the truth is we’re not doing so well. We’re afraid that if people knew the truth about us, they’d not like us or reject or shun us. Last year the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation and the American Bar Association gave a survey to 12,800 licensed, practicing attorneys across the states. Overall, the results revealed that about 21% qualified as problem drinkers and 28% struggled with mild or serious depression. When asked about drug use, 3/4ths of the lawyers left those questions blank, which is revealing in itself. But of the 3,500 who did answer, 20% said they had used drugs in the previous year.<sup>1</sup> I’m sure we all know professionals—doctors, lawyers, professors, architects, engineers, clergy, maybe even some of you here today—who struggle with addictions and yet daily send out the message that everything is just fine. I’ll talk about what can be done about this in a moment, but I want to say a bit more about this topic in light of our emphasis this morning on criminal justice and the mixed messages we give to returning citizens.

No one wakes up in the morning and says “I’m happily going to feed my drug addiction today.” So why do people say “Yes” to drugs when they know the damage it causes them personally and how it destroys their lives in so many ways? Medical professionals have long known that addictive drugs like heroin and opioids cause physiological changes in our brains. We have evolved to be creatures who respond to internal stimuli; we seek the pleasurable rush that comes with activities that preserve our species, like food and sex, while taking seriously the inhibitors designed to protect us from danger. Drugs affect both these processes. They heighten the “reward” signals from our brain—giving us a rush of joy and pleasure that is hard-wired to some of our most primal instincts. And they diminish the power of our internal “brakes”—the impulses that keep us from doing things contrary to safety and personal health. Drug addiction that is sustained and persistent is not simply a matter of a person making poor choices. It is a chronic physiological condition that needs to be managed and treated. It is a changed internal chemistry more than it is a moral failing.

Yet how do we respond to drug users? We send the mixed message that we care for people and want to help, but our actions are to blame users—and worse, to isolate them from resources that could help by locking them up behind bars, away from family, from their children, and from employment opportunities, spending billions of dollars for incarceration rather than one-fifth the costs more effectively spent on treatment and rehab. 50% of the population in federal prisons is there for drug offenses. And the impact of a felony conviction lasts a lifetime—always marking the box for “felon” on job applications, failing background checks, losing gainful employment and sometimes custody of one’s children, being unable to find housing or track down resources for counseling or substance abuse treatments. The lofty rhetoric says “These people have served their time and paid their debt,” but the grim reality is we still reject them and hinder them from ever rejoining us in the world, in God’s vineyard, in the human family.

Jesus told the parable about the two sons to the group of faith leaders who questioned his authority. In the end, Jesus was the one questioning their authority—their supposed

prestige and ranks of honor—reminding them that too often they had said “Yes” to God in words, but “No” to God in actions. He reminded them that tax collectors and prostitutes and people on the margins of life had all responded to John the Baptist—had repented and turned around their lives—had stepped away from false gods and false priorities and believed the good news of the gospel. Those people would be the ones leading the procession into the kingdom of God, far ahead of the religious priests and elders who thought they should be at the head of the parade.

Ultimately, Jesus’ parable offers more grace than judgment. Those who, for whatever reason, have said “No” to God are still children of God—beloved, called to serve, to act with justice and compassion. And they (let’s be honest: you and I) can change our mixed message at any point. We can change our “no” to a “yes” this very day—in our words and deeds, in our advocacy for prison reform and in our daily acts of mercy. By doing so, we become children who do work in the vineyard and thus bring joy to our heavenly Mother and Father, who rejoices greatly whenever a lost and straying sheep has been found (Luke 15:6).

Ask yourself: Who do you imagine will be beside you in heaven? Who will be part of the procession into God’s realm? That is not an abstract or mythological concept. It reflects a fundamental perception we carry around with us as a part of our faith and our worldview. If those we avoid in life will be those beside us in whatever follows after life, shouldn’t we stop our mixed messages? Shouldn’t our beliefs and our actions be consistent here and now?

Sometimes all it takes for faithful change to happen is for us to see things from a different perspective. For example, a city isn’t just a collection of buildings in an urban setting around which traffic flows. The city *is* the traffic—it is the movement of cars and people around all those buildings. That is the stuff of life that makes a city, not the real estate.<sup>2</sup> A healthy business model is not one that says “Yes” to every Dunkin’ Donuts franchise while saying “No” to the people who are forced to work there for minimum wages and no benefits. The people *are* the business, not vice versa. In the same way, those who, at some point, say “no” to God—who say “no” to their own health, their own integrity, their own best interests—are not forever outside the concern of God. In truth, they are at the heart of God’s concerns. And every one of them is beside us as we seek to live and act out God’s will “on earth as it is in heaven.”

So no more mixed messages. Let your “yes” be “yes” and your “no” be “no”—and may what you do, what we do as a community and nation, be in keeping with what we believe and know in our hearts to be true. Christ invites us to work in the world’s vineyard. If you find it difficult to follow through on this invitation, remember that the one inviting is right beside you in the responding. Jesus walks with us always—carries us when we need to be carried—forgives us generously and completely. That gospel message is unambiguous, unmixed and unwavering. By grace, may our responses be just the same.

AMEN

---

<sup>1</sup> Eilene Zimmerman, "The Lawyer, The Addict," *New York Times*, July 15, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Frayn, The Human Touch, 2006, p. 20.