

January 18, 2015

TEXT: John 1:43-51

TITLE: When the First Answer is “No”

No one likes to hear the word “no.” No one likes to make a request or muster the strength to name a dream for another person and then be told “No.” The young child asks, “Can I have a cookie?” - “No, it will spoil your supper.” The school girl asks “Can I go outside and play?” - “No, you have to finish your homework.” The high schooler gets up the courage to ask “Do you want to go out with me?” - “No, let’s just be friends.” Applicants to college open letters that say, “No, you can’t come here.” Job seekers are told, “There’s no work here for you.” Doctors sit across from patients and say, “There’s nothing else I can do.”

No one likes to hear the word “no.” Granted, sometimes “no” needs to be said – when the request is inappropriate, unethical, or unworthy. But far too often “No” is a knee-jerk response and not the right answer and we know it. So what do you do? Well, sometimes it is important not to take “No” for an answer. Western author Louis L’Amour received more than 200 rejections before someone finally agreed to publish his first book. Mystery writer Agatha Christie received rejection letters for five years straight before landing a publisher. Despite being told “Your work is too different from other juvenile works... to warrant its selling,” Dr. Seuss persevered. Despite receiving 140 rejections stating that “anthologies don’t sell,” the editors of Chicken Soup for the Soul kept at it. One literary agency told their client to get a day job since she wasn’t about to make any money in children’s literature, but it was only when a publisher’s 8-year old daughter asked to read the manuscript that things turned around for J.K. Rowling of Harry Potter fame.

However, our focus today isn’t on J.K. Rowling and her tenacity. Our focus is on someone from the other side of the equation – a young man named Nathanael, who when initially told about Jesus responded negatively, muttering the question “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” So we need to spend a few moments considering the naysayers in life, because, well, there are just so many of them around and sometimes we’re like that ourselves.

Why are people quick to say “No”? I suggest it is often because of policy and prejudice. How often have you been told “No” because your request would violate some arbitrary rule? How often have you felt that some policies only exist so someone can say “No” to anything that is different or creative or fun? Randy Pausch, the CMU professor who wrote the bestseller The Last Lecture, got married rather late in life. He was going away on his honeymoon and didn’t want to be disturbed, but his supervisor told him, “No, the policy is that you have to provide a way for people to reach you if necessary.” So Pausch left this on his voice mail: *“Hi, this is Randy. I waited until I was 39 to get married, so my wife and I are going away for a month. I hope you don’t have a problem with that, but my boss does. Apparently I have to be reachable. Pausch then gave the name of his wife’s parents and the city where they lived, and said: If you call directory*

assistance, you can get their number; and if you can convince my new in-laws that your emergency merits interrupting their only daughter's honeymoon, they have our number." He didn't get any calls.

Being told "No" for policy reasons is frustrating, but not as frustrating as being told "no" for prejudicial reasons. This type of rejection is built around the dangerous idea that you can make a decision about a person based on something superficial, like where they come from, how they speak, or what they look like. Researchers have documented that when requests about apartments come in e-mails from people with stereotypically African American names, they will get fewer responses than normal. This was also true for similar e-mails sent to faculty members asking about research opportunities or information requests sent to white state legislators from both parties – biases apparently triggered by the name linked to the message. Even eBay auctions showed this bias, with 21% more responses coming if the photo showed a white hand holding the item versus a black hand holding it.¹

"No's" spoken for prejudicial or racist reasons are especially damaging. Back in June 1941, America needed every possible skilled worker to bring our military production up to levels necessary to support Britain, Russia and our own national defense. Yet routinely defense industries told qualified African American applicants that no person of color would be considered. The *Pittsburgh Courier* noted that "experienced [African American] machinists are being refused employment while white men and boys who have had no training in this work are being hired and trained later." An unsung hero of the pre-Civil Rights movement was A. Philip Randolph, the leader of the union of Sleeping Car Porters. He decided that, in the face of this corporate policy of discrimination, a march on Washington should happen. Thousands of African Americans were ready to march and expose this injustice in our nation. Aided by Eleanor Roosevelt and others, Randolph finally got a meeting with Franklin Roosevelt, insisting that the march would go on as planned unless something was done to outlaw workplace discrimination. His pressure led Roosevelt to issue an executive order that required "the equitable participation of all workers in defense industries, without discrimination because of race, creed, color or national origin."² There was still more work to be done on this issue, and other marches would happen in subsequent years, but Randolph made sure that "No" would not be the final word on equality and justice in this land.

In this world, you will be told "No." What is to be done about that fact? The simple answer is that you need to be tenacious, persevere; when the matter is important enough, you need to keep trying like those famous authors did who received baskets full of rejection letters. But let's bring this subject closer to home – to our church home. Many of you are here today and I'm grateful for your presence. But many, many more are not here – not in church anywhere. Some of them are your neighbors; some are your children and loved ones. They have said "No" to

organized religion and worship attendance. Like Nathanael, they've basically said, "Can anything good come out of the church?" What's our response?

Look closely at the gospel story. On one level we can't be too hard on Nathanael when he said "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" The town of Nazareth during the time of Jesus only had about 300-400 residents. It is never mentioned in the Old Testament. No Hebrew scripture even hints at a Messiah coming from Galilee. So when Philip came up to Nathanael and said point-blank, "We have found him about whom Moses and the prophets wrote – Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth," it is no surprise that Nathanael was skeptical. For reasons of policy (Old Testament scripture) and prejudice (Nazareth is a backwater town), Nathanael said "No" to Philip's news.

So what did Philip do in response? Did he hand him a book of doctrines to study? (No, Jesus hadn't done any huge amount of preaching yet.) Did he give him a pamphlet that described Jesus' wonders and miracles? (No, according to John's gospel, Jesus hadn't done any of those things yet.) Did he give him a bag of candy, a loaf of freshly baked bread, a gift card to the Starbucks coffee shop in the church's front lobby? (No, no, no. That's all just marketing and has nothing to do with evangelism.) Nathanael's first answer to Philip appeared to be a rejection: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" But Philip's brilliant response was only three words: "Come and see."

Earlier I mentioned how many folks are not here today – family, friends, neighbors, who have basically said, "Can anything good come out of the church?" The best response for us is to say what Philip did: "Come and see." No one comes to understand who Jesus is in a vacuum. You need to actually get off the couch and engage with Jesus, and church is a great place to do that. I didn't say a perfect place, mind you. We get a lot of things wrong here on a weekly basis. But even with that disclaimer, think about it. In all sincerity say to someone, "Come and see what it feels like to pray – to pray with others, to pray for yourself and notice how that changes you. Come and see what it is like to make promises at a baptism or to take part in communion with a diverse congregation or joining with others to finally speak up about things that really matter in this life – and yes, the life to come.

For you theologians, Christology follows from discipleship. We don't understand who Jesus is and then decide to follow him; we follow him and in that come to know who he is. And if, in following Jesus, we end up praying or working or re-prioritizing our lives or stopping what is destructive to ourselves and others, there's a very good chance that we'll no longer put up with naysayers' policies and naysayers' prejudices. We will end up with enough faith so we too will say to someone else, "Hey, this Jesus of Nazareth is real. Come and see."

No one has heard more "No's" over the centuries than God has. But God's light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. God's love

remains. Christ's call goes forth today. The Spirit still blows and moves us to do what is right for all. Philip's invitation is extended to each of you this very day. "Come and see." What do you say?

¹ Sendhil Mullainathan, "The Measuring Sticks of Racial Bias." *New York Times*, Jan. 4, 2015, 6.

² Doris Kearns Goodwin, No Ordinary Time, Simon & Shuster, 1994, pp. 246-253.