

# “Just Say Yes”

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Memorial United Methodist Church  
White Plains, New York  
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[Lectionary: 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45:10-17 (or Psalm 72); Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30]

Scripture reading: Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30]

A few years after Albert Einstein published his General Theory of Relativity in 1916, Arthur Buller, a Canadian mycologist, published a slightly mocking limerick about it in *Punch*:

There was a young lady named Bright  
Whose speed was much faster than light;  
She set out one day,  
In a relative way  
And returned on the previous night.

(Arthur Henry Reginald Buller, *Punch* (Dec. 19, 1923))

It has been suggested that relativity and quantum physics provide insight into the mind of the Almighty. If so, then certainly they demonstrate that God’s way is not necessarily our way. Jesus preached this same fact time and time again, particularly in the parables – of the Prodigal Son, upon whose return the father killed the fatted calf, when the faithful brother had never received even a goat; of the workers in the vineyard, who were paid the same wage whether they worked twelve hours or two; of the 99 sheep, abandoned by the shepherd while he searched for the one lost one.

Why do we find Jesus’ teachings so hard to accept, and virtually impossible to follow? Three passages in our Gospel reading clarify that question, and the passage in Romans provides an answer.

The first passage: verses 28-30. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” It’s true. As I have preached before, the great irony of the Christian faith is not that it is so difficult but that it is so easy. Easy and light because Jesus has done all the heavy lifting. The only thing that God asks of *us* is to love God and our neighbor. Or as Micah put it, “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8) Yes, we say, but remaining faithful to God means feeding the hungry, liberating the captive, tending the sick, visiting the prisoner, caring for the widow and orphan. That’s kind of inconvenient, you know. And Jesus warned us that following him will put us at odds with our family and friends. It could even get dangerous. After all, being faithful to God cost Jesus his life. Why bother?

The second passage tells us why: verse 19. “Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” When push comes to shove, we really believe that might makes right. To the victor go not only the spoils but also the right (or rather the power) to write history. But one hundred and forty-three years after the end of the Civil War we still suffer the calamitous effects of slavery. And the price of European colonialism in Africa is even now paid in the coin of genocide, corruption, and poverty on an unimaginable scale. For millennia, Israel and Palestine have exchanged blow for blow, spear for spear, missile for missile, and are less safe than ever. And a thousand years of warfare between the Christian and Muslim worlds have produced the tragedy of 9/11; and most experts would concede, whether conservative or liberal, that the Iraq war has served as the single most effective tool in the recruitment of Islamic terrorists. To quote Hosea, “For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind” (Hosea 8:7). Or Paul, “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow” (Galatians 6:7). Our lectionary Gospel reading conveniently leaves out verses 20-24. Read verse 24: “For if the deeds of power done in you [by Jesus] had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day [because they would have repented]. But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.” Wisdom, Jesus says, is vindicated by deeds. Well, then our deeds vindicate not wisdom but stupidity beyond all comprehension. We just don’t get it, that violence will always beget violence.

The third passage: verse 25. “At that time Jesus said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.’” Of course, Jesus has his tongue

in his cheek so far here, it's poking out the other side. "The wise and intelligent" – imbeciles. Jesus doesn't tell us to *think* about his yoke, to *analyze* his burden, or to *cogitate* over the sick, the poor, the captive, the sick, the imprisoned. When I was a high school exchange student in Germany in the mid-1960's, a well-known American Marxist student came to the Freie Universität in Berlin, the seat of the student Marxist movement in Germany. He immediately sought out the local student Marxist group and found them discussing a children's playground, in a working class neighborhood, that was about to be bulldozed. He called on the group to organize a protest and lay down in front of the bulldozers, but the group insisted they must first determine how their actions fit in with Marxist dogma. Of course, by the time they figured it out, the playground was a parking lot. But like that organizer, Jesus says, "Just do it." Just say yes. It is so easy. And it is. And the consequences of saying no are, as they have always been, catastrophic, in this world, let's not even think about the next.

So why don't we do it? Why don't we just accept Jesus at his word? Why don't we just say yes to Jesus? As Ernie Campbell once put it, we are locked in a room with open doors.

In shockingly candid language, Paul concedes that we do not do what we want but instead do the very thing we hate. Why? Because we remain slaves to the law of sin (Romans 7:25). Until recently, when I read David Lull's commentary on Romans, I pretty much ignored language like that – "slaves to the law of sin." It seemed so archaic, so meaningless. How wrong I was. As interpreted by Paul, Jesus' teachings about the law of the spirit, drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures, are so radical that, if we practiced them, they would destroy the very foundations of Western civilization.

Most of us have been taught that when Jesus and Paul speak of the "law," they are talking only about the Torah and its 613 commandments. Not so. Jesus and Paul are talking about ALL law – *every* pronouncement, *every* commandment as to what we must do. Here's what David Lull writes about our Epistle lesson: "I recognize that the commandments to do these things [forgive, love, give up an addiction] are right and righteous, but this does not enable me to obey. Indeed, encountering a commandment heightens the inner division within me.... What Paul rejected was not behavior conforming to the law but *slavery* to the law. Slavery implies that one *must* obey it or at least *should* obey it...Paul's analysis...must apply equally to Jewish, Greek, or Roman law, or to Jewish, Christian, or Islamic law, or, in our own time, German, British, or American law. Sin's power perverts every attempt to organize life around any law." (John B. Cobb & David J. Lull,

*Romans* (2005), pp. 108-109, 111, 114) (No wonder the Roman and Jewish powers and principalities assassinated Jesus. They would have been crazy not to.)

The point is that by remaining faithful to God, even to death on the cross, Jesus has freed us from the law, from ALL laws. We may *choose* to behave in a way that conforms to the law – whether the law of the Torah or the law of the State of New York. But as Christians we completely reject the idea that any of these laws has any authority over us. If living in faithfulness to Christ calls us to violate the law, then we violate the law, any law, without hesitation or qualification.

This teaching about the law has profound implications, not only practical and political implications but theological implications as well. It means that anyone – whether pope or bishop or preacher or friend – anyone who tries to tell us what we must believe in order to be a Christian is nothing less than the anti-Christ because they are trying to enslave us again with the very law from which Christ died to free us. Let's say it: according to Paul, a Christian creed is anti-Christian.

So, having been freed from the law of sin and death, the doors to our prison having been thrown open by Christ Jesus our Lord, we need only to walk out. Once we accept our freedom, the powers and principalities of this world no longer have any hold over us; even death itself has no hold over us. Even in the midst of violence, we are at peace – shalom.

We have seen it in our own time. Dr. King, Archbishop Romero, the Chicago postal worker who donated 75% of his gross salary to charity, the poor Southern housekeeper who scrimped and saved her whole life to give hundreds of thousands of dollars to charity. They never bemoaned their sacrifice, never even conceived of it as a sacrifice. Shalom.

Perhaps the rest of us have been incarcerated so long we have become institutionalized. Because Jesus and Paul are pretty clear. All we need to do is just walk out the door. Just say yes to Jesus.

So what do we do? If we can't bring ourselves, not yet, to walk out that open door, what do we do?

Here's a story I read recently in *The Arizona Republic*:

A Native-American grandfather was talking to his grandson about how he felt. [The grandfather] said, "I feel as if I have two wolves

fighting in my heart. One wolf is the vengeful, angry, violent one. The other wolf is the loving, compassionate one.” The grandson asked him, “Which wolf will win the fight in your heart?” The grandfather answered, “The one I feed.”

*(The Arizona Republic, May 11, 2008)*

Until we mount the courage to walk out the door thrown open by Christ, until we mount the courage to just say yes to Jesus, we must at least feed the compassionate wolf in our hearts.

Amen.

Benediction: Go in peace. Do what is right. Serve God. Amen.