



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Saying 'Yes' and Saying 'No'

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

June 8, 2014

One of the first marks of independence in little children is when they learn that they have the ability to make choices. They test that ability generally by making "no" their default answer. Wise parents learn that you offer choices. "You can pick up your toys and then watch 5 more minutes or you can go to bed now." I know that this has been a magical formula for my grandson. He has learned to choose between finishing his dinner which leads to dessert or getting down from the table and being done. The choice is up to him.

The earliest followers of Jesus had choices. They could have said, "well that was quite a ride, I learned a lot but I think I'll go back to my old life." But they chose to say "yes", which was the beginning of their journey and ours. We follow the path of choices and we come together to learn how to make the ones that are coherent with all that Jesus taught and all that he is to us today.

A favorite contemporary theologian of mine is Dr. Richard Beck. He is a most interesting intersection of Christianity. Dr. Beck is the chair of the Psychology Department at Abilene Christian University, a school founded by the Church of Christ of which he is a member. It is a denomination that can be considered conservative. Not to be confused with the United Church of Christ, as in the Congregational Church. The Church of Christ doesn't have creeds or clergy, lay people do the preaching, but not women people. Their music is all *a cappella*, no instrumental music in worship because they take cues from the Bible and there is no mention of the early Christians singing with instrumental accompaniment. So they maintain a musical tradition that is as close to the original as they understand it. So it might be something of a surprise that Richard Beck is a progressive Christian. He took a stand at his church to not participate in any activity from which women were excluded. So he doesn't preach there. He has commented, "My church is more conservative than I am, but I love them to death." Dr. Beck has a great appreciation for many traditions, including the Episcopal Church. His personal prayer life is organized around our Book of Common Prayer. He wrote a piece last week on renunciation which he drew from our Baptismal liturgy. He said, "We don't talk a lot about renunciation in Christianity. Conservative Christians talk a lot about being forgiven but they don't talk a lot about renunciation. Progressive Christians talk a lot about justice but they don't talk a lot about renunciation.

The Latin root of the word renunciation means "to protest against." The contemporary definition is "the formal rejection of something."

As *The Book of Common Prayer* indicates, renunciation rests at the heart of the Christian identity. To be clear, renunciation isn't the whole of the Christian identity, but renunciation is a critical part of the foundation. To say 'Yes' to "Jesus is Lord" involves an associated No."

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The clearest statement about what it means to say yes to Jesus in the Gospels is found in the 9th chapter of Luke; "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." Christians are called to denounce a life lived solely for ourselves. We are to say "no" to that and "yes" to living for others.

This is not something that we just step into, unless the Holy Spirit really does a number on us. We have to grow into it. We have to abide within a Christian community that helps to form us, that challenges us and that holds us up when we fall down or fall short. Again, Richard Beck says,

Now I have to admit, I have an ascetic streak. It's joyful and grace-filled, but I'm a big believer that spiritual maturity and sanctification involves daily acts of renunciation and self-denial... You aren't denying yourself in order to earn your way into heaven. Self-denial isn't about collecting spiritual merit badges. Nor are you denying yourself because God is a Puritanical Judge waiting to zap you with lightning bolts if you eat chocolate, dance or *enjoy wine*. No, the reason you deny yourself is so that *you can make yourself increasingly available to others.*"

I'll come back to this bit of wisdom in a minute. But first I want us to look at what we as Christians are called to renounce. In the earliest days of the church, Christians found themselves in conflict with Rome over military service. They asked themselves, "if I follow the Prince of Peace, how can I take part in war and the exercise of power over others?" This question is still with us today. Peter's grandfather, Bishop Lawrence, of Western Massachusetts was a Conscientious Objector during WWII. That was not an easy or popular decision but he could not take up arms against another human being. It is something that no one can decide for you. But if you are a Christian, the question and its tension must be honored.

I believe that we are called to renounce violence in all forms. And if we are so called, then our actions, our speech and our thoughts are the workplace of our faith. This is not easy...especially if you are a hockey fan. How often do we celebrate the ritual fisticuffs on ice, or in our movies, television shows and games? Can we even imagine a world without violence? *You may say that I'm a dreamer.*

The question that is asked of those who would be baptized says, "Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?" Violence is at the top of the list of things that corrupt and destroy. You don't need me to point out once again how violent we Americans are. But it does bear repeating that it is not in accordance with what we want and believe.

Saying no to violence, in all of its forms, is a challenging spiritual campaign. But unlike economic inequality and the way that corrupts our society, we can do something about our own relationship with violence. We can become mindful about its presence, renounce it, and replace it with something more kind and creative.

Hundreds of times a day, we are given the opportunity to make choices. Some affect only us, others the entire planet. If being a Christian is to mean anything, it must inform the decisions that we make. Our lives become a journey of awareness, connecting what we know of Jesus to the myriad choices presented to us by our time and circumstance. We are called to make ourselves available to each other which will always mean renouncing the illusion of separateness, forgoing what is may be easiest for us, standing for something hopeful.

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This morning, this bright red Pentecost day, we are welcoming two beautiful little girls into the community of Christ. What we show them will teach more than words that we memorize. What will doing everything in our power to support them in their lives in Christ look like? It has to be more than a good Godly Play program. It must show them that they matter to us and to God so much that we are willing to sacrifice our time by reaching out and getting to know these families, to be there for them as they raise their children in a complex and increasingly conflicted world. It becomes easier when we know what we protest against and what we embrace.

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