

The Practice of Saying No
Exodus 20: 8-11
Feb 5, 2012
Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

The last day I did absolutely nothing was December 28. It's not that I didn't have anything to do! In fact, I had a list of things that needed to be done but I had promised myself that I would give myself a break, a day off, a Sabbath rest. And so I slept in. And I read a novel in my pajamas most the day. I ate when I was hungry and I napped when I was tired. And then when it was all said and done, I went to bed early. It had been too long since I had said "no", "no" to the list of demands on my time and energy, "no" to my ego which convinced me I was important and needed, "no" to the expectations of those around me to provide their food, dream up their entertainment, meet their needs, fill their vacuums. It had been too long since I had claimed a Sabbath rest for myself, for my spirit, for God.

What is it about saying "no" that is so difficult? I can say "no" to broccoli, to mathematics, to ice hockey! But those are things I find distasteful to begin with so it's not a big deal, no challenge or struggle there. But saying "no" does not come easily for most of us. We live in a culture and society that demands "yes"! "Yes" I can do that, be that, try that. "Yes" I will purchase that product your commercial tells me I need; "yes" I will donate to that cause because without me children/dogs/cats/rain forests won't live; "yes" I will put in those extra hours, take on another task so that my employer will see how hard I work and how valuable I am and just might skip over me next time jobs are cut.....Daily we are bombarded with demands for our "yes"; and here the biblical text demands our "no". How are we to live? "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.

Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God....” Saying “no” in one of the fundamentals ways of practicing our faith.

The practice of Sabbath keeping falls directly in the heart of the commandments God gives to the people of Israel. It calls for the setting apart, the consecration, of a time and space in which our attention, our devotion, our “yes” is to God and God alone. No work is to be accomplished on this day, and no obligation of work is to be required from others. Not family members, not employees, not animals, not strangers. Because God rested after six days of creating, God declared this day not “good,” like everything else, but holy. God said “no”.

But that’s not easy for us to do. We are busy people. And inspite of what we say, most of us *like* being busy people. Our cultural tells us that our worth is measured by how much we do, so the more we do, the more valuable we are. Or think we are. You know this is true. We measure worth in production and outcomes. The more I produce, whether for my employer or my church or my organization, the more valuable I am. I often think how unhealthy it is for me to hear people say to me, “I just don’t know how you do it all! You’re just so busy!” And for me to reply something like, “Yeah, well, I just keep moving!” That used to make me feel good, self- righteous, important, like *I* was the one who was doing something extraordinary, like *I* was the one people needed to do this task, like *I* was the one who was valued. What I really want to say now when I hear that is something more along the lines of “Don’t encourage that in me; I need to get off this wild ride and learn how un-necessary I can be!”

But that’s not all. Not only does our society say we are valued because of what we produce it also tells us that what we produce is the measure of our success. We are

successful if we have a full calendar, a bulging wallet, a big house, a gaggle of friends. So we say “yes” to working longer, harder, not only to keep our jobs but to gain better jobs, to buy a bigger house, to extend our credit just a little further, in order to buy that car, take that vacation, entertain our friends even when we know it’s not good for our health, that its costly to our relationships, that we can’t afford it, even when, deep in our hearts, we really long to say “no”.

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” This is not an *invitation* to say “no”; it’s a command, an obligation. It demands that in the practice of our faith we say “no” to all the things that keep us from focusing our attention fully, completely, on God. It asks us to set aside a space and time to give ourselves over to the Holy, to allow our energy to be spent on nothing other than our noticing God. It doesn’t demand we do any one thing; it doesn’t insist that we give, serve, strive, or suffer. It just invites us to rest....to stop, to turn away from our culture’s values, to set aside; not to *do* but to *be*....to be with and in God.

Well, here you are, so you must be doing it, right?! Don’t be so sure. One of the hardest “no’s” to say is to the church, to our sense of religious obligation, to our “duty” of faith. Somehow we have come to believe that if we only work harder, dream up more programs, bake more cookies God will be pleased....when in reality even righteous busyness remains busyness and reflects more of our society’s values than God’s .

Saying “no” may be one of the most difficult spiritual disciplines of our faith. It requires attentive discernment, resisting cultural expectations, and confident understanding of who we are before God. It demands that we make choices that aren’t

mainstream or popular, that we do less instead of more, that we secure our sense of self not in others but in God.

Our Jewish brothers and sisters light two candles when the first three stars can be counted in the Sabbath night sky; one candle for rest, one candle for freedom. The candle for rest reminds them of God's divine rest at the completion of creation; even the most meaningful work does not go on forever. The designation of the Sabbath as "holy" makes it the most sacred thing in all creation. We who are made in the Creator's image enjoy the same rest as God! "The first Sabbath candle announces: made in God's image, you too shall rest." (Brown Taylor, 131)

The second Sabbath candle reminds them of freedom. Remembering that God delivered them from slavery in Egypt and then instructed them to observe the Sabbath, the "second Sabbath candle announces made in God's image, you too are free." (BT, 131)

Such reminders would serve us well too! Each of us need to be reminded that as busy or stressed or hurried or hassled or as important or as necessary as we are, we are not more than God, God who needed, desired, understood the importance of saying "no", of time set apart, of rest. And it is such a time and space that brings our freedom! Freedom to release ourselves from the obligations forced upon us by society, by each other, by our own ego needs, by the church....freedom to make wise and careful choices, to discern intentionally, to the prayerful use of our time, energy, talents, wisdom; freedom to say "no" to this so that we can say "yes" to God! "Yes" to the one who loves us not for what we do, but for who we are.

If you think you can't say "no" because you are too important, too needed, too *needy*, too afraid of what might happen, then you are serving the wrong god. We are called to say "no" to anything and everything that takes our spirits away from the living, loving, renewing presence of God. Say "no" to those things so that you can say "yes" to God; "yes" to your own health and wholeness, "yes" to yourself as the image of God, "yes" to God's way as the only way for this is where we will find rest and freedom.