

The Power of Yes

Categories: Uncategorized

Recently, there was an election where I live. The main vote was for giving the county permission to sell bonds to fund needed upgrades to the infrastructure of the county-parks, roads, etc. It should have been a slam dunk since everything is falling apart-and it was-a slam-dunk rejection of every piece of the bond. People chose potholes over pennies on the tax rate. It was a stunning defeat for rationality and forward thinking. Even more recently, we have seen the events of Paris play out in our own country with the hysterical reaction of banning all Syrian refugees from coming to America even though not one refugee has been involved in any kind of terrorism in the U.S. One has to wonder if there won't be a proposal in an upcoming presidential debate to turn the Statue of Liberty around so the great lady can turn her back on those who might seek refuge here. Again, what we are seeing is a big N-O to compassion and progress based upon bias and fear.

One must wonder why we see so many rejections and have to listen to so many naysayers in our culture. What is it about saying no that seems to trump (pardon the use of the word) our ability to say yes?

First of all, no is easy; yes is hard. Saying no ends the discussion. It leaves no room for error. You can't blame people for what doesn't happen. You can't prove or disprove a negative. The results of saying no aren't apparent for a long time. A mistake of saying yes to the wrong thing is often readily apparent and usually bears an immediate price. It is just easier to say no than to take a chance.

Saying no also speaks to the greed that permeates our society. If I am asked to give something, saying no allows me to keep what I have rather than giving it (or paying it in the form of taxes) to others. Much of our political dialogue is really about this argument. The whole battle between the haves and the have-nots, the 47% made famous in the last presidential election and the rest of us, the war between the "takers" and the "makers," is all nothing more than asking whether some will say yes so others might improve their chances of success.

Saying no also speaks to the fear that flows like a flood through our culture. Politicians feed off it, the media plays it up, and there are whole industries created to take advantage of the fears we all have. Certainly the world can be a scary place, but we don't have to live our lives in fear. I have done a lot of international travel. Often friends have asked me whether I am afraid to travel to these exotic and different places. My response is always the same. I tell them I try to be respectful of the environment I'm in. When I was in Nairobi, Kenya, I choose not to go out at night by myself. It didn't seem prudent. On the other hand, when I lived in Washington, D.C., I choose not go out at night unless I was with others or going to a place that I knew would be safe. I didn't do this out of fear; I did it because I am respectful of my environment. You can get mugged in Kenya. You can get mugged in America. You can be respectful of the various dangers in our lives without becoming paralyzed by fear. If you constantly say no to opportunities, you might avoid the dangers, but you will also lose out on the rewards. I wouldn't trade my trip to Kenya for anything even though I realized it could sometimes be a scary place. I love that I have walked among the powerful and moving places in Jerusalem, even though the first time I was there was in the middle of the First Intifada. In the midst of a near riot in old Jerusalem, I was taken in by a Bedouin merchant. We sat in his shop, drinking tea, and speaking of our respective cultures while chaos reigned just outside the shop. We learned about each other, gained

mutual respect, and he made sure that I got back to my hotel safely once things had quieted down. Saying yes can put you in riskier situations, but saying no robs you of rewards.

Saying no speaks to the prejudices we all carry deep inside us. My best friend in life was a black man who grew up in the inner city of Minneapolis. As a white man who grew up in the south, it was perhaps a strange choice for both of us. My mother, who in so many ways was a wonderful person, was also a person who lived her life in a war between yes and no. After she met my friend Richard, she said he was a nice person but she wondered how I could be best friends with a black person. I took great joy in reminding her that it was her who had taught me that God loves all his children and so should I. I had taken her moments of yes to overcome the moments of no that were also there.

And that is the whole point. When teaching our children, what shall we teach them? Should we teach them the safety of no or the power of yes? Should we teach them to hug the comfortable shores of their safe harbors or should we encourage them to launch out into the world to find their possibilities? Should we teach them that saying no to others is selfish and limiting while saying yes to others opens them to new understandings and insights. Yes is the doorway to love, while no keeps the door shut tight. Yes can be one of the most powerful words in our language. It's a great word for our children to learn.