

WHEN I SAY NO, I FEEL GUILTY

July 23, 1989

Luke 8:19-21 and Luke 12:13-21

Mark Dunn

In order to introduce this morning's sermon, I want to paint a mental picture in your minds of a husband and wife planning their Saturday recreation. The husband has planned a golf outing with some friends at work. He had checked the family calendar and observed that nothing was planned for that Saturday. That is what he thought until his wife shared her plans for just the two of them.

The wife is keenly aware that they hadn't had a relaxing time together without the kids. Because there is some shopping that needs to be done she suggests to him that they should take Saturday to be together, go shopping and have a quiet lunch. The wife knows that shopping is not her husbands' favorite past time, so she is prepared and quickly informs him before he can offer a rebuttle, that her parents have already agreed to take care of the kids and just how long it has been since they have had some time together. Immediately, he feels guilty for even wanting to go golfing. So without sharing his plans, cancels his golf game.

But the story doesn't have a happy ending. As they are walking in and out of the stores, he begins to imagine how much fun the guys are having at the golf course. The more he daydreams about this, the more he drags his feet and becomes obnoxious. His lovely wife tries on a beautiful dress and he doesn't like it. While he didn't say no previously, now he is saying no to everything. They eat lunch at their favorite place in cold silence.

Now I know that this pictorial scenario is a little chauvinistic, but after 22 years of marriage it has repeated itself in some form or the other, time and time again. When I say no I feel guilty is the issue

I. A TIME TO SAY NO

There is a time to say no to requests directed at us. We can usually say "no" to the stranger. We can usually shake our heads with a nay to the community organizational representative who is seeking contributions outside the grocery store. But when someone in whom we care deeply makes a request, it is most difficult to say "no." Or someone in whom our relationship is fragile. Dear Abby continues to answer letters about the neighbor who drops in each afternoon during dinnertime. Or, the grandparent who complains about her adult children unexpectantly bring the grandchildren over for her to baby sit. Grandma has just cleaned the melted crayons out of the dryer from last weekend. Now they are back again.

A. Boundaries. Knowing when and where to say no to someone you love concerns the issue of boundaries. When an American visits another country, we have to have a passport, but that is not a ticket to just go walking in to the other country. The visitor then has to go through customs. In every country, as it is in ours, there are places which are "off limits." The country has set these boundaries which are off limits.

Peter Schellenbaum in his book, "How to Say No to the One You Love," says that we have to understand "how to draw the boundaries" which are right for us.(P.66) Those boundaries may shift from day to day. Husband comes home after a successful and stimulating day with romance on his mind. Maybe the wife has a

career as well and her day has been one failure after the other. She picks up the kids at the nursery, stops by the grocery store to purchase the ingredients for dinner and pulls in the driveway just in time to break up a fight in the back seat. Exhausted, she walks into the house with an arm full of groceries to be greeted by a husband who is "grinning like a mule eating briars." The boundaries of romance have changed. I would hope he would be sensitive to those boundaries.

Jesus knew about boundaries and that there are times to say no. In the 12th chapter of Luke, we have the story of a man who requested that Jesus "bid my brother divide the inheritance with me." Jesus didn't actually use the word "no," but it is definitely implied when he responds to the man's request with the question: "Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?" Jesus wasn't a lawyer and the request was beyond the boundary of his expertise. It was time to refuse a request. Jesus even used his request to point him to spiritual values.

B. Manipulation. Secondly, there is a time to say no when we discern that we are being manipulated. As a clergy person who feels as though I answered a call from God to enter the professional ministry, God's spirit did not manipulate me. There was just a gentle pull.. I was free to say no to the pull of God's spirit. When we rise from our beds on Sunday morning, we may feel the spirit pulling us to worship. We are free to say no to that and many do. God's Spirit makes us feel guilty but the pull will not be manipulative.

However, manipulation does enter into human relationships. Manuel Smith, in his book, "When I Say No, I Feel Guilty," which is where I obtained the title for this sermon, tells of a manipulative scenario that happens all too often. A door to door salesman is trying to sell you some magazine subscriptions. You have already been hit up before and now you have more literature coming into your home than you can read. However, the salesperson has a way of using guilt to make a sale. He or she informs you that the company is donating a percentage of the sales to crippled children. Who can refuse to help crippled children?(P.134-5) What Christian can refuse to help?

Sometimes it is time to say no when people step over our boundaries with their requests and when we are being manipulated.

II. FALSE GUILT

So, we assert ourselves and say no. We inform our children that they will have to find another baby sitter. We tell the cute little boy who is selling candy for a worthy cause, that we are on a diet and don't want any. But what do we feel after we have closed the door on his disappointed little face? The word for that inward phenomenon is guilt.

Most of us avoid the guilt; we just say yes. In our household, we've borrowed money from our own children to buy some candy bars which we didn't need. You say, of course, that you'll help because you don't want to feel and look like an uncaring person. So most of us avoid the guilt and say yes, while those who muster up the courage to say no walk away feeling guilty. The guilt we feel is really false guilt.

"False guilt," according to Dr. Paul Tournier, "is that which comes as a result of the judgments and suggestions of men."(P.67) False guilt is guilt we feel on the inside but we are not guilty before God. We said no to a request and felt guilty about saying no but we really and truly didn't violate "an authentic

standard." When we inform an aging parent that we won't be able to see them this weekend, guilt shouldn't be a result if you truly are being fair to them.

In the passage I read a moment ago, Jesus' mother and brothers have sent a message to him. They want to see him. If we read between the lines in this passage, we will notice Jesus' family at this time is not in sympathy with him. The Gospel of Mark tells how his kinsmen came and tried to restrain him because they believed him to be mad. In this particular incident, they are trying to persuade him to come home to the carpentry shop. We know he doesn't comply with their wishes.

Jesus had to accomplish the mission to which God called him. If he had neglected the inner call of God and returned with his family, this would have been true guilt before God. Again Paul Tournier proclaims that, "The Bible affirms that the only true guilt is disobedience to God." (P.69)

I remember the day as clear as if it were yesterday when I made a very important request of my father. I was at a turning point in my life. After making that request, I could see that my father was struggling for an answer. He didn't want to have to say no to his son's request, but he did. This morning I really can't share with you what that request was all about. I can share with you that I was immediately disappointed with his answer. He felt the false guilt associated with saying no to someone you love. Today I am so thankful his answer was no. I would never have gone to seminary if he had said yes, and I wouldn't I be here.

There are times to say no to the requests of others. You may feel guilt as the result of that answer, but it is false guilt. It is not true guilt before God.

III. A WAY TO SAY NO

Not only is false guilt a problem in saying no to those we love, but how do you say no to requests and not alienate them. Some might say don't worry about it. If your friend gets mad at you because you refuse to loan him your car, then he or she wasn't much of a friend. So just forget about them. Personally, that attitude is not all that Christian.

I don't want to turn this sermon into a step by step method of how to say no to those we love. But you know and I know that a refusal which is rude can alienate while a refusal which is sensitive to their feelings may serve to deepen the relationship. Just pretend with me that a very close friend has asked to borrow your brand new car; the one for which you saved for a year to come up with the down payment. The same one in which you have yet to make the first payment on a 48 month loan. This is a friend in which you have a pattern of always saying yes to their requests. For the sake of your relationship you need to say no. I would say that it is best to share one's feelings and then talk about a way to handle the problem. Maybe you could drive them to their destination.

Jesus said no to his mother's and his brother's request and this served to help their relationship mature. When Jesus died on the cross, his mother was with him. When the early church began, Jesus' brothers provided leadership for the struggling church. Jesus' family came to see him because he said no to them and yes to God. Because of His refusal, they could believe he was God's Son.

CONCLUSION

We started this morning's reflection with a scenario that often occurs between husband and wife or with other relationships with those we love. We witness warmth degenerate into irritation and frustration because the husband did not share his true feelings. He said yes to a request when he wanted to say no. He never verbalized his true feelings, but his body language did. Maybe a workable compromise could have been worked out if he had shared his feelings.

How many times have we prayed diligently for a worthy cause or for some specific thing. We couldn't believe that God would refuse to answer our prayer. But God's answer is NO. It is NO because He loves us. Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Dear God,

One day a man came to your symbol and asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus asked him what he thought it was. He responded, "To love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind, and to love your neighbor as you love yourself."

Even today it sounds so simple, yet it is such a great challenge. Too often we settle for a mere shadow of the real thing. To truly love, we may have to lovingly respond in the negative. This is risky.

When we look to you, we see the perfect lover. You have accepted us just as we are. You have been hurt by us, but you have forgiven us as well. We have been disobedient, but when we ask for a new start you are willing to give it to us.

So often we are afraid to love others, because we are afraid to take the risk of letting others know us as we truly are. When our children are small, we can so easily say, "Don't touch the stove, it's hot." But when they are adults, because we need their love, we never really risk compromises or even a "No." We are afraid that they will find us unlovable. But you know us best of all. Yet, you who know not only our actions, but our every motive and every thought--you love us still. You loved; you took the risk and your son ended up on the cross. Yet the resurrection proved once and for all that love will conquer hate, forgiveness can overcome sin, reconciliation will overcome broken relationships, and life will overcome death.

Let us learn to love as you have loved us. Amen.