

Saying Yes and Saying No

This is the second in a series of posts on spiritual practices. In the first post, I talked about spiritual practices being defined as a way of reformation of ones' relationship with God. A definition we Lutherans can own. The spiritual practice I want to talk about today is one named by M. Shawn Copeland in the book Practicing Our Faith; "Learning how and when to say yes and no is a practice that is crucial in our attempt to choose life. It is an essential part of growth before, with and toward the divine."

This is a practice that challenges us every day, every moment, to stop and be aware of how we make choices. Will it make room for God or take room from God? How would this reform life if we first considered this question before making a choice? What is interesting that if you are reading this, you don't need a lot of work on choosing the obvious things that are good or bad for your life. Where I think this practice gets tricky in that often as Christians (not always) we can't choose between different 'versions of good'. They all seem good and necessary and fulfilling of Christ's example of service. So we either try to take on too much, feeling that this our 'cross' that Christ spoke of or we are left with this guilty feeling we should be doing more. Perhaps at times, this kind of 'saying yes' leads to unrealized resentment and lack of joy in our lives as followers of the Way.

As a chronic over-doer (despite knowing that I am saved by grace), a quote of St. Augustine has been a helpful guide:

"There is so much beauty in the world you can't love it all. And there is so much good to do in the world, you can't do it all. And to try to, is sin."

I think St. Augustine was telling us that trying to do more than what we are called to leads us away from God and the thing that God most wants--which is our very hearts. That statement 'reformed' me into thinking more and more about what I say 'yes' to and what I say 'no' to. Once a wise person said to me, "you can stop trying to save the world--Christ has already done that."

Volumes more could be written on the process of this discernment--what choices will bring us closer to God. But all this begs the next question--how do I know if this choice will bring me closer to God?

One of the ways is to practice the Examen of Conscience. At the end of the day, just before closing your eyes, take a few deep breaths, review the day and ask:

What made me feel alive today? Grateful? Touched me? Who and when was I able to effortlessly love?

Then ask yourself: Where did I feel a little 'dead' today? When was I frustrated and resentful? When did I reserve my ability to love?

Then recall what you said yes to in the day. Did you feel grateful or reserved or confused about that choice? What did you say no to? Did you feel it was a way of loving yourself and others or did you feel yourself 'check out' of life when you did it?

It is this practice of awareness that God can work with and help guide. In this way, we become more attuned to ways God is calling us LIFE.

You will find in this practice, that you begin to see how the Spirit moves with us throughout our day, constantly giving us guidance and helping us to discern whether 'to say yes or to say no.' And that which you most desire, a closer walk with God, begins to unfold for it is the very same thing that God so desires.

Comments or questions?
email at mwakeland@gmail.com