

“Kill-Joy”
Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-2; Hosea 11
Gordon Wiersma 8/1/10

Here’s a question for you – something to think about: do you think of your faith in God, would you describe the spiritual center of your life, your essence of being a Christian – a follower of Jesus Christ – would you say it is mainly about things that you do or about things that you’re not supposed to do? Is it mainly a matter of good things to do or of bad things to avoid? I don’t know how all of you would answer that – but I think you have an idea of the “right” answer, don’t you? What would be the enlightened sort of thing to say: which is that faith is about good things we do, not primarily a list of forbidden actions. That sounds better, right, to say faith is about doing good rather than avoiding bad – so I think that’s the answer we’d all tend toward.

But if that was your answer – ‘it’s about doing good’ - then I would say: ‘I don’t believe you...you may say your faith is about expressing good rather than a laundry list of “nos”, but really you believe that restrictions and prohibitions are at the core’. And you would say – ‘no, I really don’t’ ; and then I would say – clearly you are in denial, and not willing to face the reality inside of you...you know what they say... “De-Nial isn’t just a river in Egypt...!” ...and that would pretty much settle things because it is very difficult to deny being in denial...!

I could do that – but there’s probably a better way to get at this than saying we are all in mass denial – since I would definitely have to include myself as well. Because what I really want to say is that there are some very deep-rooted things in the way faith in God is often presented and experienced that express faith at it’s core as being about prohibition – restriction – “NO!” – and I want to say that is a problem. So I just want to try to acknowledge that first, and see how or why it’s a problem. Maybe “NO!” is not at the center for you right now – but I’m sure we all know the feeling: many people grew up over the generations in a faith context that was a lot about NOs: a lot of rules – a lot of punishment; there’s a strong puritan influence that has influenced perceptions of faith for us – Christianity being about purity and discipline and seriousness. “NO” as a center for faith, in Christianity and in other religions, has a prevalent past and present.

I was thinking that if we would ask the young people of our church – our youths – what they thought about this...they would probably know to say that “right” answer of faith being about doing good things; but if our youths are paying attention to things around them in this world, and they are, they know the characterization of Christianity that they often hear, both from within the church and outside it: that it is a lot of rules, a lot of NOs – a lot about being better than, superior to others – perhaps even saying no to a lot of fun...for young people in

some ways it may be a particular challenge to think of faith as something other than NO.

Just think of what Colossians said this morning: ‘put to death all earthly things – do not fornicate, put away impurity and passion and evil desires and greed and idolatry...that is the stuff of the wrath of God’... ‘get rid of anger and slander and harmful language and lying’ – instead of ‘Just Do It’ it’s ‘Just Don’t It’! And there was that daunting parable in Luke: a rich farmer gets richer and he’s going to celebrate his success – time to party – to relax, eat, drink, and be merry...but NO - that night he dies! – and the farmer’s maker is not in a partying mood at all – “you fool...”. Christianity here is the ultimate kill-joy – literally. If you wandered into church and heard that today, what would you think is at the center of faith? – sounds like NO!

I’m going to turn from this direction soon, toward what I think is a different take on all of this. But just to be sure that you are persuaded of the prevalence of this NO approach to faith, I want to share some of what I think is a unique perspective I have as a minister. Because from the time some 25 years ago that I started Seminary, to this very day, I never cease to be amazed at how people assume that because I am a minister that means I am an overly-serious, mostly joy-less, judgmental, moralistic, basically boring person – really! That’s the starting point I must work from – and that is particularly the case for people who are not a

part of a church or who've had a negative church experience, but sometimes true within the church too. From my vantage point I can see that the perception out there is not an appealing one – and for me, personally, I don't think it's true! But for a lot of people the idea of faith in God is a lot of NO.

But it's not at all just about what “they” think of “me” – because really it's there in me too, and in you, and in all of us to some degree – that question of what faith is about: and over the generations, and through a certain hearing of scripture, and in the practices and teachings of faith, and through countless in-your-face sermons, the voice of NO for faith is a strong one. And I find that concerning – mainly because I don't believe it's true; but also because I think it ultimately makes faith irrelevant to real life – when you're stuck on DON'T, you lose the capacity to really delve into a DO that means much at all – and that's a problem.

Alright – so what's a different direction? Well, I think it starts with questioning the question...starts with questioning if faith is really about deciding between DO and DON'T, about focusing on OK or NOk, at all. So here's a different question: ‘who is God?’ and ‘who are you?’ I guess that's 2 questions. But it's a very different way of getting at what is at the heart of faith. ‘Who is God?’ – the One, the only One who made you and truly knows you and loves you; ‘who are you?’ – you are made to know and love the God that knows and loves you. Many of you have heard this from me before – stick around and you'll hear it

from me again – because I need to hear it and we need to hear it and our world needs to hear it. It's such a different voice - a different starting point than where we've often gotten stuck with faith, and certainly different than the voice of our world: it's a voice that life, faith (which are really the same thing – how you live your life) is about the truth of who God is and of who you are – really of what this whole creation is: a God who gives life and our lives a response of gratitude to that gift, that grace. There is such depth and possibility and joy and challenge and substance and hope and spirit in that voice – but not always the loudest voice in the clamor we hear around us and within us.

But are you, am I, maybe just a bit skeptical of that gracious voice...? It would be nice, this 'God who knows you and you know God', stuff, right? But we have to listen to Colossians and Luke: it's DO and DON'T, it's pass or fail, it's who's good and who's bad, it's God allowing me in or keeping me out. But listen also to Hosea – one of the most strident and graphic and forceful judgment-spewing prophets that there is...but this is the word of God from Hosea: '...Israel my child, my beloved – you ran from me but I took you in my arms and healed you; I loved you and fed you, knelt down and held you; you turned away and were consumed with violence, and I am consumed with anger – but I cannot destroy you, for I am God, not mortal – my roar...will be the call that brings you home to

me.’ It is stunning – this intimate and honest picture of God expressing a love that will not end.

So when we hear Hosea, it allows us to listen to Colossians again... and hear that all of those NOs are about expressing the things that rob us of life, of joy, of meaning – and hear that those NOs are wrapped in the message of receiving life and identity: ‘...raised with Christ – clothed with a new self – renewed in the image of God your Creator...’ – and the final word is a picture of humanity not about divisions and conflict, but a shared community of life – in Christ who is all in all – the God of life who will not let us go. It is about who God is and who we are.

We can listen to Luke again... and hear that this is a parable – it is a work of art meant to startle us and pull us out of our assumptions and into the kingdom. Jesus sees in the question asked from the crowd about ‘who gets the money?’ as a view that has the richness of life blocked by the dead-end obsession with things. So isn’t it good news in this parable that this man is identified as a fool?! Good news that it’s not true that life is a contest for stuff which no one can win?! Isn’t it intriguing to describe true life not as NO! – but as rich – rich toward God...?

It’s important, the voice, the center of faith that we listen to – what we are saying to ourselves, to each other, about what faith in God, following Christ, is about. When we start not with NO but with who God is and who we are, it is

amazing what we can hear the Spirit speak – it is powerful the way we are opened up to the fullness of life God calls us to.

I realized as I was writing this sermon that I was thinking about our High Hopes mission trip that we are leaving on this afternoon – not just because I was thinking of a lot of details about the trip...but because what I want for our youth is to embrace and be embraced by a faith not about DONTs and DOS, but about a God who loves them and their lives an expression of gratitude to God – and I think that life looks a lot like a mission trip: it is challenging and fun and hard work and learning and community and wonderful and difficult and good – it is joy, because it is life lived with purpose and meaning and hope. I want our youth to see faith not as a NO, but as the best YES to life that there is....that won't happen all in a week for them – or for any of us, but it is what I want for all of us – because in the midst of all the complexities and questions, the DOs and DON'Ts, the brokenness and abundance of life, that is what we are given: to know who God is and that we and this world belong to God who will not let us go, through Christ who is all in all. Let's start there in faith, and see where God leads us... AMEN.