Christ United Methodist Church
Sermons on the web

Matthew 6: 25-27

No!

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When I was growing up I loved fairy tale fantasies. I loved learning about dragons and trolls, kingdoms and royalty: I liked princesses, but not the fair-skinned weak-kneed kind of princesses: I liked girls who had power and authority and had to learn how to use it well. Royalty with real responsibility! One of my favorite stories was a book called Ella Enchanted: I read it so many times that I accidentally memorized the first few lines of the book. It goes like this: "That Fool of a fairy Lucinda did not intend to lay a curse on me: she meant to bestow a gift. When I cried inconsolably through my first hour of life, my tears were her inspiration. Shaking her head sympathetically at mother, the fairy touched my nose. 'My gift is obedience. Ella will always be obedient. Now stop crying, child.' I stopped."

We do not live in a world with fairies and princesses. But all stories of fantasy teach us something about ourselves, or we wouldn't read them. And as a people-pleasing, anxious oldest child, I related deeply to this curse of obedience, the impossible task we so often feel we burdened by, to satisfy the requests and wants and needs of everyone around us.

In many ways, we all have this curse. A blessing, yes, too. We want to make each other happy. We want to do what is right, to follow rules, to have order. To go with

the flow, stay relaxed, say "yes" whenever we can to keep the world functioning, to not miss out on everything going on.

But a hugely important part of our Christian life is resistance. It is the practice of saying "no." And being consistent and bold and clear about our no's. If you're like me, you might say no, but usually it's after first saying yes, then freaking out and feeling overwhelmed and texting and backing out of things at the last minute. Not this kind of no. We are called to count the cost, As Jesus says in Matthew, let your yes be yes and your NO be NO. We are called through John Wesley's three simple rules, with our newly minted residents at Mayo, to be bold both by action and inaction: to first do no harm before we do good. Only when we know how to say no can we learn to resist and prevent harm at all costs.

Yesterday we had our delightful Leprechaun-trapping party with over a hundred people coming through the church to eat green cotton candy and make crafts and shop at the thrift store and eat a free delicious meal. Towards the end, a woman came through the doors distressed, looking for someone to talk to. She's a neighbor of the church, she said, waving to her apartment building across the parking lot. She's Muslim, but doesn't feel safe spending time in the mosque right now. So we sat in my office and she told me her story.

She told me about how she can't pull her eyes away from the news and it's destroying her. She's originally from Bangladesh, and the Bangladeshi cricket team is revered and wonderful, and they are in tour in Christchurch NZ right now and were just minutes away from being inside that mosque at the wrong time. She told me that despite the fact that she has her PhD and is a strong leader she experiences discrimination for her race and religion where she works, but risks losing her job if she would confront the system. Her middle-school aged daughter stopped wearing a hijab because an 8th grade boy bullied her on the bus. She doesn't feel safe to be herself, to be open about her faith. The first week the women lived in Rochester, they had to call security at the local Walmart because some customers began to aggressively harass them, calling them terrorists.

Brothers and sisters, I want to preach an easy sermon someday. I wish there was nothing going on and we could just sit and smile at each other. But we don't have time for that. We who are safely worshipping in this warm space together, we are today continuing to be called to resist the injustices and pain that so much of church has caused people: the last few weeks we have been naming the pain of gay and trans people. This weekend we must choose to condemn and name yet again the sin of white supremacy, with which Christianity has so often been complicit. We choose to name and condemn the sin of violence and hatred against all people, and particularly today our Muslim brothers and sisters. And we name that we are called to practice, in resisting the culture of discrimination we swim in, saying "no."

There's a theory in generosity, in conversations about fundraising and giving, that you must start practicing giving when you have just a little, or you will never learn to give when you have a lot. We often think "Oh, I'll give to charity and give more away, if only I had a little more money, then I could give more. It's not worth giving 10 cents when all I have is a dollar." when really, it is poorer people who give away a larger percentage of their income than richer people, on the whole. I wonder if the same thing is true with resistance, with saying no. Do you have a hard time saying no to the PTA, to your workplace, to your friends, to door-knockers, when asked to spend your time, money or give your vote? Do you struggle to interrupt or intervene when conversations around you get off-track or gossipy? Perhaps you struggle to say no even when your PASTORS ask you for something? We all do, certainly. Pastors are hard to resist. You are not alone. But today I'm challenging us to consider, that if we cannot practice having limits and choosing our values and our priorities, to saying NO in the small things, we may not be ready to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves when the cost gets higher. And really, it is in these small ways and small places that evil, injustice and oppression most deeply reside. In the grocery store, in the classroom, in the mirror. I'm also asking us to consider today: What cultures are we swimming in that we are called to resist? What is in the air we breathe that we've conformed to without realizing it? What goldfish bowl have we

outgrown that we must break?

A few examples of things to resist in our culture that I see. We can resist putting "stuff" or "activities" or "programs" over people, and by people, I'm including OURSELVES: practicing saying no, as Pastor Tyler said a few weeks ago about sabbath, is to recognize we are not god and are not called to do everything all the time. We can stop apologizing for being late and start naming and claiming how we spend our time and how we prioritize it. Be free to be where you need to be, when you need to be there, but first taking the time to think about where you want to be, and how each moment can be a practice of putting people first over power or success. The good Samaritan didn't make it to work on time, I'll tell you that much. Loving friends and family and yourself and taking time to care for the stranger, that is resistance.

We can resist, as our scripture talked about earlier, the addiction to 'worry', despite our culture of anxiety that threatens to destroy our guts and hearts and mental health and families. We can baptize babies when all hell is breaking loose everywhere else. Trust and faith and hope in God is resistance, friends.

We can resist the rush and hurry, the quick decision, the "flash mob" activism over the slow burn in our to-go-temporary-fast-food nation: we can lean instead into the life of the "ember", the slow strong warmth of caring for one another and this world with consistency. We resist the idea that we are called to just one day of protest or one lit candle or one prayer, but to a lifetime of relationship and service to one another. Daily healthy habits are resistance. So is slowing down.

Little miss Ella from my book, she went on a long journey to find and plead with the fairy who cursed her, looking to lift the curse of obedience, but she was unsuccessful. In the end the only person who ultimately could set her free was herself. She had fallen in love: but she knew that her curse could make her a weapon against her prince. If someone commanded her to cut off the prince's head or her own, she'd have to obey. Her immense love for the prince she wanted to marry meant saying "no" to his proposal, to protect him from the danger of herself. Ugh, slays me, still. She resisted and broke the curse. It was a true self-less act of

disobedience.

This is what we are called to, friends: to resist with intention. IN every text, email, request, question, this week, let's treat it as an opportunity to ask ourselves, will my yes be yes and my no be no? Can I treat every decision with reverence, and have the courage to resist when necessary? To count the cost, to know and trust that even a "no" can be holy?

As you celebrate St. Patrick's day, perhaps with a cookie or green beer or corned beef, remember that St. Patrick was a leader in resistance in the fifth century. He was one of the earliest identifiable anti-slavery activists in western civilization. …

In particular, Patrick condemned and called out the bondage of Irish women while taking note of their bravery and resilient spirit….Patrick said, 'But it is the women kept in slavery who suffer the most—and who keep their spirits up despite the menacing and terrorizing they must endure. The Lord gives grace to his many handmaids; and though they are forbidden to do so, they follow him with backbone."[1]

You are a church with backbone. I have seen it. You have seen it. Our Muslim neighbors are seeing it. Go with love and courage to serve and resist. Amen.

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