

“When God Says, ‘No!’”

Acts 16: 1-15

September 14, 2008

Rev. Curtis J. Young

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I’ve entitled this message, “When God says, ‘No!’” But after having enjoyed lunch with Chris Hewitt on Friday, I realized I could have put this in far more personal terms: “Lord, why can’t I go to *Mozambique*, now?”

Or from David Galletta’s experience, “Lord, do you really want me to learn Russian just so I can live in South Carolina?”

No one who loves the Lord begrudges his leading us to places we do not expect to go or even, want to go. Surely the Book of Jonah teaches us that. Still, his guidance can be hard to accept, especially negative guidance when a door we expected to be open is closed, when the “yes” we believed we would hear is a “no”.

And no matter how many times we tell ourselves the Lord’s negative guidance is guidance, too, and that “No” is as much an expression of his grace “Yes,” it doesn’t always feel that way. Especially when we’ve persuaded ourselves the Lord’s answer could only be, “yes”.

Some of you have known this first hand in affairs of the heart when, after lots of prayer, you thought you had met your life mate, only to find out it wasn’t to be.

Others of you know what it is to feel called to a particular career or education path as a believer. It became so strongly embedded in your heart that you viewed any other course as second best. But the Lord did not bless your drive with success.

Recently a friend, after investing years in a Ph.D. program to provide theological training, was summarily dropped from the program. How do you deal with that?

This summer some preliminary research I did as part of my course work suggests that a minister’s greatest personal challenge may be when he believes he is pursuing the Lord’s will in seeking a particular call to ministry, but then he says, “No!”

When the Lord says, “No!”, it’s humbling. One thing it does is teach us to hold our understanding of God’s will for us with an open hand. “This is my understanding, Lord. It makes sense to me go here. It feels right to head there. But I will not hold onto this as if the matter were in my hands. It is truly in your hands.”

Not just the safest, but perhaps the humblest and most godly of petitions is this: “Not my will but yours be done, Lord.” For Jesus that meant the Cross, yet in the end resurrection.

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These “No!” moments can confuse us. If I didn’t have a grasp on God’s will for me, does that mean he doesn’t have a firm hold on me? On the face of it, these are two very different things, but we tend to confuse them.

When the Lord says, “Yes,” when he gives positive guidance, we feel so assured of his presence. I don’t mean his presence in the sense that he is present everywhere all the time. I mean what the Children of Israel meant, that he is dwelling with us, that he is personally relating to us in grace.

Yet wasn’t one of the Lord’s constant affirmations to Israel that he was just as present in this wonderful sense when his guidance was negative?

Our text begins with the selection of Timothy in Lystra and concludes with the conversion of Lydia in Philippi. This is the story of the journey, both physically and spiritually. The two dimensions of life can’t be separated. Look at some of the journeying verbs in our passage:

Paul and Silas came to Derbe and then to Lystra (1)...They traveled from town to town (4)...They traveled through the region (6)...they came to the border of Mysia (7)...they went down to Troas (8) ...they left for Macedonia (10)...they sailed straight for Samothrace (11)...they traveled to Philippi (12).

This is how the Gospel reached Europe for the first time. Did Paul know this was going to happen? Of course not.

For his part, Paul was feeling his way along, seeking God’s will where to go next, figuring things out. Luke tells us that the Lord twice said, “No!”, to what Paul set out to do, though what he wanted to do made so much sense.

Paul and his band had begun cutting northwest through central Turkey. Verse 6 says they then decided to head west and south into Asia. What a great strategy! They could be traveling along the Via Sebaste highway from Pisidian Antioch; bring the Gospel to Colossae, Laodicea, and other interior cities; then reach Ephesus on the coast. But the Holy Spirit kept them from doing so.

Verse 7 tells us next, that they tried to head north to Bithynia. This was more strategic. Why didn’t they think of it first? They could bring the Gospel to the cities along the great trade route, east to west, that ran along the south coast of the Black Sea. But again, the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them.”

That left one way open, to head due west across rough terrain between the two forbidden territories. They reached Troas on the coast of the Aegean Sea. Then, finally, Paul received positive guidance, a night vision of a man of Macedonia (northern Greece) standing and pleading with him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” (9)

Paul and his companions must have conferred and prayed together, because they concluded (10) the Lord was calling them to Macedonia. They sailed at once for Neapolis and then traveled inland to Macedonia’s capital, Philippi.

I can’t help wonder if at least one member of the party asked, “Lord, why didn’t you just tell us sooner? We could have come straight, arrived earlier, been spared the disappointment of closed doors and the uncertainty of, ‘What next?’ It just doesn’t seem very purpose-driven!”

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I think it is safe to say from the Gospel record that our Lord is no less purpose-driven than the people he calls to pick up their cross to follow him.

The course of each of our lives is the curvy, angular line of the sojourner. But our crooked line is the Lord's straight line for us. It is spot on with his plan and purpose.

It is spot on with his plan for us. “No!” never means, “You don't matter!”; or, “Time to quit!”; or, “Let's feel sorry for ourselves!”

When the Lord of Lords says, “No!”, it means keep exploring, keep praying, keep conferring. The way Jesus put it was, “keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking.”

The values God cherishes for us don't include values we cherish for ourselves. They don't include ease or convenience. And they certainly don't include predictability that makes trust unnecessary.

What I love about Paul and Chris Hewitt and David Galletta and my Christian friend who was dropped from that Ph.D. program that they understand this. They understand that the Lord does cherish tenacity.

Those whose hearts are truly open to Christ understand that includes holding our dearest desires with open hands before him.

Such obedient devotion is part of our redemption, of our being remade after his image.

Paul would write the Romans with deep personal conviction, “For we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...”

“In all things” includes when the Lord says, “No!”, when door you expected to open remains firmly closed.

Was Paul better suited to preach the Gospel at Philippi for the long journey he had just taken? I believe so. He was certainly better prepared to accept the offer of hospitality when Lydia pressed him and his party to stay in her home.

“Come and stay at my house,” must have sounded sweet indeed. In Paul's life the church in Philippi would play a unique role in loving and encouraging him. He would always feel safe there. He could drop his defenses, accept gifts and support without fear of being accused of taking advantage of believers. The church would be like the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha to Jesus.

We also know that beginning with this trip, Paul and Timothy formed a special bond. Paul would write the Philippians that Timothy was his son in the faith. He never used this of Mark. Honestly, I have to wonder if Paul wasn't learning to be the spiritual father to Timothy that he had not been to Mark. When Timothy later wanted to leave his ministry at Ephesus, Paul would treat him with great gentleness.

Our crooked line is the Lord's straight line for us. It not only is in line with his plan for our lives, but with his purpose for the world.

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When Paul arrived in Philippi, what did he know? He knew he was where the Lord called him to be. He also knew at the end of this, his second journey, that he had planted five churches in three Roman provinces, including the three capitals of those provinces.

If you had said to Paul, “Congratulations, you just brought the Gospel to Europe!”, he would have said, “What’s a Europe?” If you had said, “It’s a whole separate continent,” he would have said, “What’s a continent?”

Only with the benefit of hindsight do we know that in planting the church in Europe, Paul was establishing the main base of Christian missions for the next 2,000 years; that from Europe, the church would expand to Africa, Asia, North America, South America, and Oceania

By the Lord’s plan and purpose, Dr. David Livingstone would hear God’s “No!” to go to China, only to become the pioneer medical missionary to Africa. William Carey would hear God’s “No!” at the door of Polynesia, so he would hear his “Yes!” to India and a ministry that is now legendary. Adoniram Judson would be driven out of India only to hear God’s “Yes!” for groundbreaking missions to Burma.

When the Lord said, “No!” in the matter of Russia to David Galletta, little did he know the Lord would soon say “Yes!” in calling him to train ministers all over the world.

When Chris Hewitt heard the Lord’s, “No!” to Mozambique, it is pretty clear that was because he was about to say, “Yes!” to marriage.

In 1988, I left Washington, D.C., for Seattle, promising myself I would never return here. I hoped to spend the rest of my life in Seattle. It was quite a shock to get the call from Gary Jacobs, “Come help us in Silver Spring!” I came and met church at Philippi.

The Lord’s calling for you includes both his plan for you and his purpose for the world, so that nothing you do for him is ever in vain. Here is our ground for confidence, not that we hold God’s will our hand, but that he holds all things, including us, in his.