

"Yes or No?"
Matthew 21: 23-32
Dr. Catherine Taylor
Peace and Global Witness Sunday
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
October 1, 2017

What did the table in your home mean to you
when you were growing up?
Can you see the kitchen or dining room where it stood,
and the faces that were gathered there?
Table fellowship help form who are,
it's the place that teaches us things about conversation and connection.
So, I sometimes ask about the family table
when I meet with new elders during elder training.
It's a way of learning a lot about each other,
what kinds of families we come from,
a little bit about our lives as children.
Sometimes I learn that someone *didn't* have a family table,
or that the unity of that family table was broken early on.
Whatever memories are shared,
you can see from the expressions on some faces
that people are no longer in the room where we are sitting.
They are in their family home, as some of you may be right now,
seeing people you may not have seen in a long time.

Today the Christian family of faith comes to the table together
in our different parts of the world.
All day at the table, the Church will witness to the love of Christ,
and enact in a broken world "an unbroken Christian fellowship"ⁱ
Not only are we sharing one table today,
we are also celebrating Peace and Global Witness Sunday.
It's a day of thanks in our denomination
for our global missions, and the ways they contribute
to extending God's realm of peace.
World Communion, global witness, peacemaking.
It's a lot to roll into one celebration.
So, today and for the next two Sundays, we will be
lifting up our own global commitments and giving thanks
for our mission partnerships around the world.
in Bangladesh, Guatemala, and Malawi.
Some years we have taken a Sunday for each country.
This year, our Peacemaking and Global Witness team
decided to highlight three areas of work that take place in each country.
Things that all our partnerships do:

in education, health care, and helping people
build sustainable livelihoods—education,
healthcare and sustainable livelihoods.

The team had already picked these topics
before we knew that the bulletin for today from the denomination
highlights education, with a picture of a student on the cover.
I hope you've had a chance to look at the material on the inserts,
or will take it home and spend a little time with it.

I'm going to share a bit of it in this sermon.

In a church as busy as BPC, learning all the things we do
can take some effort, but mission is probably a big part
of why this is the church where you come to worship and serve.

Two weeks from today we'll have a visit from Sy Hughes,
a PC(USA) mission engagement advisor.

He'll be the liturgist in worship and there'll be
other opportunities to visit with him that weekend,
and with Jason Chaves, a current board member
of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, who lives all the way.....
...in Christiansburg.

It is good to be part of a national church that is so active
and respected for its global partnerships.

We Presbyterians truly are one family of faith
who can pool resources to accomplish
far more than any single congregation can do alone.

But I'm grateful that the gospel lesson for today focuses on **one** family,
a father with two sons, who have different ideas about
what doing the will of the father means.

The setting for gospel story religious elites from the Temple
criticize Jesus for spending energy on people
like tax collectors and prostitutes who don't live up to religious law.

They don't like the attention that Jesus is getting
for not thinking the way they think
or doing things in strict accordance with their views.

So they ask by what authority he's healing and teaching
and doing miraculous things,
like blasting trees that don't provide fruit,
a story that immediately precedes today's reading.

It's a tense interaction with the very people who will one day
sit in judgement and call for Jesus' death.

So there is tremendous danger in this story.

Jesus knows what they're up to, and asks a counter question
about the work of John the Baptist, a question
they can't answer without falling into a trap,

so they settle for "We don't know."
 Jesus turns their non-response into a non-answer of his own,
 If he stopped there he would have been safe enough,
 but he goes on to highlight their hypocrisy
 in the parable about a father who has two sons.
 Which one does the will of the father,
 the one who *said* he would do what the father wanted, but doesn't,
 or the one who said he wouldn't, but then *did*?
 It is a story version of Jesus' statement in the Sermon on the Mount,
 "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,'
 will enter the kingdom of heaven,
 but only the one who does the will of my father."
 The implication is that the Temple priest and elders
 are name-only people, who don't live up to the very things they preach.
 Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way:
 The Temple priests and elders were the Yes men,
 ...who said all the right things, believed all the right things,
 stood for all the right things, but who would not do the right things
 that God asked them to do."
 "They thought they were doing the right things, mind you,
 but they had gotten so attached to their own ideas
 about what those things were that it was hard for them
 to accept criticism or correction.
 First John the Baptist and then Jesus, suggested
 that they trade in their beliefs for a fresh experience of God,
 but they could not bring themselves to do that.
 They said yes to God while they acted out a great big NO to Jesus,
 who suggested that they might be in for a big surprise.
 People they despised were going into the kingdom ahead of them,
 Jesus told them--not instead of them, but ahead of them,
 people who may have said no at the beginning
 but who changed their minds and went,
 while those who refused to go
 continued to mistake their own convictions
 for obedience to God."ⁱⁱ
 Jesus' question "What do you think?"
 is addressed as much to us today
 as it was to the religious officials at the Temple.
 "Are we doing the peace-making, mercy granting,
 justice-seeking work of the kingdom of God?" or aren't we?ⁱⁱⁱ
 The most honest answer is probably "Yes and no."
 Yes, we as congregation are very involved
 with efforts to better people's lives and change systems
 that work against justice and peace.
 Education, our key topic for today,
 may be the single most important avenue

to a better future for many people who otherwise
might suffer a life time of food shortages and underemployment.
Did you know that BPC pays for the education
of four students at the College of Nursing at Mulanje Mission in Malawi?
Their names are Roy, Mtisunge, Caroline,
and we're waiting to learn the name of the fourth student
whose life will be changed forever by this nursing education.

Even basic education in Malawi is not free.

Gifts given through the Malawi ministry here at BPC
are paying, through graduation, for the school fees, books,
uniforms, and daily lunch for Shadreck, Precious,
Emmanuel, Emmie, and Menard,
five secondary students at the Mulanje Mission school.

Further north Sheila and Aisha get up at 4:30 in the morning
to walk to get to their school on time.

We also pay for Gerald to go to boarding school
and Peace has one more year of secondary school
at a boarding school near Zomba.

These students are identified and mentored for us by Malawians
who have been here and have been part of our congregation.
I hope you will read more about that from the insert in the bulletin.

On this side of the world in Guatemala

The Protestant Center for Pastoral Studies in Central America,
better known to us by the acronym CEDEPCA,
incorporates education in all four of its missions,
from its seminary for pastors to faith-based efforts to help women
take leadership roles in their communities.

BPC-sponsored trips to Guatemala have allowed many of us
and, through UKirk, many college students, to have their first
mission trip and encounters with impoverished peoples
in another country and culture.

The trips may be short, but the consequences can be long,
and have impacted some students' choices of vocation.

HOLD UP SIGN, are the mission co-workers we support in Bangladesh.
I can't say their names aloud because this sermon is available
on the internet, and they might be targeted.

But they, too, include education in all that they do.

Each week in the MidWeek we print a prayers of theirs in
for some of those they encounter in their work in Bangladesh:
Perhaps you remember Aklima, a blind child;
Noor and her two small children,
Rohingya refugees, whose plight has filled the news:
Also, Anचना, a sick mother; or the farmer Hasan.

I can say aloud that the PC(USA) supports education ministries
In two districts in western Bangladesh,

including fourteen, student-level tutoring centers,
two hostels for women college students, and two primary schools.
And all I have talked about are things we're involved in only in education.

So, yes, we can say to Jesus' question
that we are a congregation are trying to do the will
of the one who calls us to live as kingdom people,
not just saying that we do.

The "no" comes in when we assume that kingdom work is
someone else's' job, "someone" sitting in these pews
will see to it that "good things" get done.

And they will, because there are people here
with the passion to go to meetings, write the letters,
read the material, make the phone calls, sit in on the panels,
take the trip, and argue about the best use of our
resources and our money.

And pray, and listen for God's leading about these things.

We assume that "it will happen" without us,
and it is certainly true that we all have demands on our time,
and that we have various kinds of interests and gifts.

Nobody can do everything, nor should they.

But all of us *can* pray for these efforts, be grateful for them,
learn about them on days like today,
and let the folks who are most involved
know that what they do matters to us.

We can also support global mission financially to ensure
that other names will keep being added to the list of lives touched
that includes Shadreck, Precious, Emmanuel, Emmie, Menard
Sheila, Aisha, Gerald, Peace, in Africa;
Aklima, Noor, Anchena, and Hasan in Bangladesh;
Aura, Edgar, Leydi, Isabel, Violeta, Paulo, Mariela in Guatemala.

This week in the church office, we received a very ugly mailing
from the Yes crowd, the ones who say yes but act No.

It was a collection of articles, demonizing immigrants
and especially Muslims, marked in red pen with urgent handwriting.

There were some choice words for the Democratic party, too.

There was no name, of course, but there was
a sticky note on top with a hand-written message
in red pen inviting us as a church to join the cause.

Worst of all, it was post-marked with the address
of another church in town.

Sherry had opened it and was distressed when she brought it in.

I sat there holding this vile stuff for a moment,
thinking badly about my sister church in town,
when suddenly it hit me that maybe it wasn't them.

So I called the church, and asked for the pastor, a guy I once met briefly .
When the receptionist told me he wasn't in,
I told her what the call was about
and she was as distressed by it, too.
No, she said, the screed had certainly not come from them.
We agreed to send it for them to see, envelope included.
Just think how close Sherry and I came to thinking fellow
neighbors down the road were spreading hate and lies.
What saved the situation was contact, connection, conversation,
the sort of conversations and connections Jesus sought to make
with people his co-religionists thought were beyond the pale.
I think that act of making a phone was a gift to me
from the Spirit of Christ, a gift that urged
Don't settle for false words; take the risk to act, reach out, connect.
The kingdom that gathers at one table today
depends not on what we say,
but on everything we do. AMEN.

ⁱ This paragraph is based on a quote from Jesse M. Bader, founder of World Communion Sunday, quoted in Elmer G. Homrighausen, “Cooperative Christianity in the Local Community,” in Edwin T. Dahlberg, ed., *Herald of the Evangel* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1965), p. 118.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor sermon entitled “The Yes and No Brothers,” collected in *Home By Another Way*, 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tom Long, *Matthew*, *Westminster Bible Companion*, p. 244.