

THE MEANING OF NO

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Grace Church in New York
The First Sunday in Lent
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And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may eat freely of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." (Genesis 2:16-17)

The rectory garden of Grace Church is a surprising delight in the urban jungle of our neighborhood. It is a green and pleasant enclosure with a gate that is open from dawn to dusk. Throughout the day people come inside to stroll the paths and enjoy the quiet, to stare at the Roman urn and wonder what it is, to take pictures of themselves and the flowers. Most of the visitors are perfectly appropriate and respect the signs. But every once in a while people come in who consider themselves more crafty than your garden variety tourist.

Not long ago, on a beautiful fall afternoon, a photographer and his model entered the garden and began preparations for what promised to be a lengthy photo shoot. Ignoring the sign that says 'No Professional Photography,' they dropped their bags and set up a tripod near the parish house entrance. The model dropped her overcoat to reveal an outfit of not much more than fig leaves (she was neither naked nor ashamed). They were blocking the path and generally being a nuisance, so one of our maintenance guys told them it was time to pack up and leave. The photographer became belligerent and refused to budge, even after the school security guard came on the scene.

It was about this time when I returned from teaching a class at the school, and I went out to hear the man arguing that he had every right to take photos in a public place. We pointed to the signs that clearly stated otherwise, but he was unmoved and demanded an explanation. I told him that we did not owe him an explanation. No means no, and if he didn't leave we'd call the police. Guess what he did. He called the police, who came and escorted him out to the sidewalk. For the remainder of the day I marveled at the man's failure to grasp the meaning of the word no. What lack in his upbringing and education was responsible? What part of no didn't he understand?

Today's reading from the Book of Genesis has reminded me of the frustrating encounter with the photographer. We've heard a portion of the well-known story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The tale is not meant to be history, but an allegory that speaks deep truth about the nature of God and human existence. God places the man and the woman in the green and pleasant enclosure to enjoy all that it has to offer. They are to be in perfect relationship with God. They'll have no need for prayer, sacraments, or church because God is right there with them. They are to be in perfect relationship with the earth. They'll have no need to kill other animals because the garden will supply all the fruit they need. They are to be in perfect relationship with each other. They'll have nothing to be ashamed of and no reason to hide, so why bother with clothing? In short, they are to enjoy perfect everything, with just one caveat. That tree of the knowledge of good and evil: don't eat from it. Why not? God owes them no explanation, but gives them one anyway. Its fruit is poisonous to the life of perfect relationship God created them to share. If they eat of it they will die.

We all know what happens even before we heard today's reading. The serpent, who is the craftiest creature in the garden, tempts the woman who then tempts the man, and they both wind up eating the forbidden fruit. Essentially, the serpent succeeds by convincing them that no doesn't really mean no. The prohibition is unfair. It is unjust. In fact no probably means yes, because if you eat of the tree you'll become wise like God. Surely God want his creatures to be wise. So

there you have the wisdom of the serpent: no means yes. The woman and the man succumb to the logic and everything goes awry on every level. They lose the life of paradise.

The story of Adam and Eve in the garden is perhaps the most examined and reflected upon passage in all of literature. My intention today is not to add to the chorus of commentators and critics, but merely to stand back and marvel at the mayhem that ensues when we fail to grasp the meaning of no. In creating the man and the woman, God set a limit between human and divine knowledge. One way to think about Adam and Eve's reaching beyond the limit God set is as an invasion of God's privacy. The same could be said of the soon-to-be built Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), which would be an attempt to peer into God's life without God's permission. The author of the Book of Job (38:11), in reflecting on the creation and God's separating the sea from the land, imagines God's saying to the sea, "*Thus far shall you come and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed.*" Here is where the sea stops and the land begins. Here is where I stop and you begin. Needless to say, a world of pain and suffering and sin follows the failure to grasp to concept, "*Thus far shall you come and no farther.*" No means no. I leave it to you to connect the dots of the harm that is caused in church and society when people can't or won't take no for an answer.

Strangely, even people of good will who generally respect limits and boundaries often take issue with the story of the fall from grace. Why would God not want the eyes of Adam and Eve to be opened? Isn't the knowledge of good and evil a good thing to have, especially since a crafty serpent seems to be lurking in the garden? And who put the serpent there in the first place? Well, we hear in today's reading that the Lord God made the serpent, and God made the serpent crafty. Perhaps then the man and woman were supposed to eat the forbidden fruit all along. Ultimately, it was a happy thing that they did. In fact, a particular and popular strain of Christian theology teaches as much. It usually goes by the Latin phrase, *felix culpa*, which in English means "happy fault." The thinking is that Adam's sin was a blessing in disguise because it resulted in the coming of Jesus. Without the fall from grace we wouldn't have Christmas. And who but the Grinch doesn't like Christmas? So goes the song: *Blessed be the time that apple taken was! Therefore we may sing: Deo gratias!* Thanks be to God.

Call me a Grinch if you must, but it seems to me that when Jesus went into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil he wasn't singing *O felix culpa*. In today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew (4:1-11) it's more like Jesus was cleaning up the mess Adam had made. We've heard how Jesus contended with Satan to reverse the fault, not in any way to praise it or give thanks for it. The Gospels of Mark and Luke also give accounts of Jesus' being tempted by Satan, and these passages, like the fall from grace in Genesis, have never ceased to inspire commentators and theologians who mine them for meaning. One way to think about what Jesus accomplished in the desert was to draw the line again, and remind the devil that no means no. But the devil wanted Jesus to consider how much good might result if no meant yes. Imagine the happy outcome, Jesus, if you became a bread king and fed people. Imagine how the masses would worship you if you would dazzle them with miracles and fly like a superhero. Imagine how you could rule the earth the way you wanted if you would compromise, bow down and worship me. But Jesus replied, "Away with you, Satan, for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him!'" Thus far shall you come and no farther. No. What part of no don't you understand?

And so we come to Lent. As most of you know, Lent is that season of the church year consisting of the forty days before Easter (not counting Sundays) when we do our best to go with Jesus into the wilderness. Lent can be a time when we give ourselves a refresher course in the meaning of no. We begin our Sunday services with the Penitential Order, reciting the Commandments to remind ourselves that when it comes to murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and coveting – just to name a few – no means no. Then during the week it's customary to take on some discipline of prayer or self-denial. Food and drink are the classic battle grounds of Lent.

On Monday afternoon I was working in my office and feeling rather hungry. I remembered that the day before – last Sunday – we’d had our Shrove Sunday feast, at the end of which a largely untouched cheese platter had likely gone into the Tuttle Hall kitchen refrigerator. I didn’t know for sure, but I thought to myself, “Why not go see?” No, I concluded, and I shook off the temptation and went back to work. Still being hungry, visions of cheese cubes danced in my head. I reasoned with myself that it would all go to waste if nobody ate them. Maybe so, but they would all go to my waist if I ate them. So I said no: no to the Manchego, no to the parmesan, no to the cheddar, and no to the Swiss. Then on Tuesday afternoon I found myself in the same hungry predicament. Surely by now the cheese would be gone, so I went to check. There they were for the taking, all the little cheese cubes. The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat. (It was really good.) Amen, Lord have mercy.

Today’s closing hymn is one of the classics of the Christian faith: “A mighty fortress is our God.” Both the lyrics and the tune were composed by the 16th century German monk, Martin Luther. As you sing the hymn it will be hard to miss the references to Luther’s own struggles against the devil:

For still our ancient foe
doth seek to work us woe;
his craft and power are great,
and armed with cruel hate,
on earth is not his equal.

A legend about Luther tells of a tumultuous period in his life when he’d been condemned as a heretic. He’d made many enemies who did not wish him well. Thus he spent ten months in hiding in Wartburg Castle. To fill the time he wrote books and translated the New Testament into German. All the while he was beset by manifold temptations that he attributed to demonic attacks. The story goes that one night the devil’s presence was so real for Luther that he picked up the inkwell on his desk and threw it at the apparition. *Thus far shall you come and no farther!* It is said that the ink stain on the wall remained visible for hundreds of years.

Is Lent merely about gritting your teeth and exercising the power of the human will to resist – or not – the wiles of the devil? Is learning the meaning of no simply a matter of confiding in our own strength? If it were, the things we say today would hardly be counted as good news. Our words would be little more than good advice, just another plan for self-improvement. But in fact today we do speak of a means of grace and a hope of glory. Luther would go on in his hymn to write:

Did we in our own strength confide,
our striving would be losing;
were not the right man on our side,
the man of God’s own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he.

What Luther came to understand and believe and trust is what the heart of the gospel had always been: that we have the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit to call upon for strength in times of trouble. We will all face temptations to say yes when God’s word is clearly no. We will all endure others who refuse to take no for an answer, and must be told, “Thus far shall you come and no farther.” Nevertheless, we confront these trials and tribulations not alone, but in a living relationship with Jesus, who was tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin. By his grace we are able to triumph over every evil, and live no longer for ourselves alone, but for him who died for us and rose again.