

Praying the Limits

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For the past four years I have served on our diocese's Commission on Ministry, sharing with the bishop and the rest of the commission the task of deciding who will be selected to enter the ordination process. Sometimes we recommend that the bishop say Yes and select the person for ordination in this diocese. And sometimes we recommend No.

If there is one thing that I've learned in being part of this discernment process, it is that it is painful to say No. It is often with an ache in the heart that Commission-members conclude that a person's gifts for ministry do not fit the needs for ordained leadership in this diocese at this time. But even more painful than saying No is the experience of hearing No. I can't think of a single applicant who didn't express--and with good reason--some degree of disappointment, sorrow, or anger when the answer came back: No.

Whether or not we are seeking ordination, there are many ways that we can hear No's in our lives. Perhaps we grieve for the partner we never found; for the children we were unable to conceive; for the money that couldn't be raised; for the marriage that fell apart; for the illness that cut a life short; for the great work that was never accomplished; for the dream that died. Hearing a No brings us up against our limits. We may long to hear Yes. Indeed, we may have counted on hearing Yes. But for one reason or another the word we have been given is not Yes. It is No. And we are thrust into a spiritual wrestling match with God, as we try to make meaning of our lives.

Questions confront us: What am I going to make of this? What are God and I together going to make of this? What does this No mean in terms of my relationship with God? What is this No saying about who I am called to be and what I am called to do? And how do I pray with this No, so that the Holy Spirit can integrate it into my life with God?

Experience suggests that the first thing we need to do when we hear a No is to recognize the loss, to name it, identify it, reflect on what it means. Especially when we hear a big No--when the No shakes us to the core, when it marks a divide in our lives between "before" and "after" the No was heard--then we definitely need to take time to look inward and give ourselves space for reflection and integration.

We will need to mourn. We will need to feel the feelings that attend the loss--perhaps shock (I can't believe this is happening! This can't be real!), anger (This is outrageous! This isn't fair!), embarrassment (What will others think of me?), anxiety (What will become of me? What will I do now?), and sorrow (It hurts so much. This is more than I can bear.). If it's a big loss, we'll probably need to ask for help, to find a friend or counselor who won't try to talk us out of feeling what we feel. We may also need help in listening for how this loss is calling up earlier losses that are crying out now for attention and further healing.

We will need to grieve our losses within the embrace of God's love. How tempting it is, when we hear a No, to let it fuel our chronic self-rejection. "See?" we may hear a voice within us say. "This loss just shows how inadequate I am, how incompetent, how worthless, how basically unloved." Every No tempts us to reject ourselves, to add to the pain that comes with any No the additional (and unnecessary) suffering of self-hatred.

I remember a long bout with infertility early in my marriage. I remember the drugs, the surgery, the hours of impassioned prayers. I remember letting a nasty suspicion play havoc in my heart: maybe my inability to conceive was God's way of protecting me from motherhood, God's way of protecting me (and any potential child) from the knowledge that I would make a terrible mother. Maybe I deserved to be childless. Maybe infertility was God's punishment for some sin from my past. Maybe at some deep place in my core I was secretly unloved, secretly unlovable. I remember how much encouragement I needed to throw myself on the mercy of a loving God, and to ask for forgiveness if I had sinned. I remember what trust it took to accept that God had accepted me. I remember what love was released when I could begin to accept my belovedness in God: to dare to trust that whatever frustration I was feeling, whatever sorrow and disappointment had come my way, God's love for me was abiding, and would see me through even this great pain.

I remember discovering a small gesture that still recalls me to my belovedness in God: on days when God's love seems lost, I can take my thumb and gently trace on my forehead the sign of the cross. I can remember the blessing: I have been baptized into Christ. I have been sealed in Baptism. I have been marked as Christ's own forever.

When we pray our losses within the embrace of God's love, we bring all the inevitable No's of life within the context of God's Yes. For God is always saying Yes to us: Yes to our belovedness, Yes to the steadfast tenderness with which God's holds us each in love. There may indeed be losses we have to suffer, even from people we have loved or trusted, even from our own Christian community. There may be deaths we have to die. But at some deep level of our being, God is always saying to us: Yes. As St. Paul writes, "The Son of God, Jesus Christ, was. . .not 'Yes' and 'No'; but in him it is always 'Yes'. For in him every one of God's promises is a 'Yes'" (2 Corinthians 1:19-20).

Can we find ways to listen to God's Yes, even when the voices around us and within us are telling us to listen to something else? Can we find ways to steep ourselves in the enduring tenderness of God, even when we are tempted to slide into self-doubt or compensate with self-righteousness? These are the questions that confront us when we come to the end of a road, when we reach a closed door, hit an impasse, meet a limit. Every No is a challenge to us to step forward in faith, to ask ourselves, and to ask God, "How will God use this No to draw me deeper into the heart of God? How will God transform this death into a crucifixion that will bring new life?"

The Yes of God may come in a form that we readily understand. Six weeks after surrendering to God my own deep longing to have a child, I discovered that I was pregnant, and eventually gave birth to a strong, healthy son.

But the Yes of God may take a form that we didn't expect. Three years after my son was born, I conceived again, but this time the pregnancy ended prematurely. Our child, a daughter, died in our arms. As I prayed my way through this resounding No, I discovered more fully than ever God's power to create a Yes. I began to see how God could use a No to invite me into a deeper intimacy with Jesus, who freely wept and raged and rejoiced, letting everything that was in him participate in his relationship with God. I began to see how God can use a No to open our hearts to a compassion that we may have never experienced before, as we begin to see how brokenness and loss connect us to the suffering of all living creatures. I began to see how God can use a No to open our eyes to the love that transcends the fears and ambitions of the ego.

Through the power of God, the No's in life can teach us something about humility and trust, something about courage and compassion. Through the power of God, even the limits, failures,

frustrations that are ours can speak to us of the love of God, so that our lives are no longer defined by the No's we've heard but rather by what God has been able to make of them.

In the end, we must make a choice. When we hear a No, we can let ourselves slip into bitterness or cynicism. We can lock ourselves up in self-doubt and self-hatred, or in self-righteousness and envy. We can choose to ponder the endless "What if's" and "If only's." We can play out the rest of our lives with one constant, repetitive refrain: "I didn't get what I wanted. I got gyped. I thought this was what God wanted. I got hurt. It's not fair." Or we can choose to keep our eyes on God. We can mourn and pray, watch and listen, and ask for the One who loved us into being to show us what God now wants us to see, what God now hopes we will do.

And God may in fact be calling us out to begin something very new, to try out something we might never have ventured before if we hadn't heard this No. God may also be calling us to protest and to help transform the No's that are unjust, to challenge, for example, the No's of clericalism, racism, sexism, classism, and all the other powers and principalities that are a sign of sin. God may also be calling us to a new vocation, to a new community, to a new perspective on our ministry. If we haven't been selected for ordination, God may be calling us to claim our baptized ministry with a power and passion that we've never felt before. God may be calling us to a ministry that may be "hidden with Christ" (Colossians 3:3) from the eyes of the world, until the ministry of the baptized receives at last the recognition that it deserves. God may be calling us--and the whole Church--to recognize that God has let loose among us a spiritual power which can never be the exclusive possession of the ordained.

At the very least, in every No, in whatever form it takes, God is inviting us to a deeper conversion of the heart, so that we may begin to taste for ourselves the freedom that St. Paul knew, when he wrote from his prison cell, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through [the One] who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:12-13).

Here is a man who has spent his converted life in an active, passionate, creative quest to welcome and help bring into being the community of love for which God yearns. His efforts have met with both praise and blame, both gratefulness and scorn. In all things he has kept his focus on the desire of God, not on his own personal desires. Whether he has met with a Yes or with a No, whether his own personal desires have been fulfilled or not, Paul has learned to place his trust, and to direct his longing toward the One whose word to us is always Yes. He is a man who is free.

As I come up against the No's of my own life, and as you come up against yours, perhaps we can help each other keep our gaze on God and live as gracefully as we can with the No's that always have been, and always will be, woven into the fabric of our lives. Perhaps, through the power of the Spirit, we will come to see that God is transforming every No into Yes, including the No that we perceive when the time comes for us to die. Perhaps we will come to see that even at the grave, God's word to us is always Yes. Alleluia.



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