

October 19, 2025
Lectionary 29, Year C
Genesis 32:22-31
Luke 18:1-8
The 19th Sunday after Pentecost
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Yes and No

“No.” No means no. No is a complete sentence. Those are things that would run through my head when my kids were little and my knee jerk reaction was to tell them no about something. Because I wanted them to believe that I meant what I said. I wanted them to believe that my word was trustworthy, whether it was yes or no. I didn’t want them to think that I was wishy washy, unreliable, easily swayed or persuaded. Because I wanted them to believe me when I told them something and listen to me when I told them to do something, or not to do something.

I still think that this was a valid parenting strategy for my children’s early years. But sometimes it got me into trouble, because sometimes I would say no, just because I was tired or overwhelmed, or even, I’ll admit, not giving my full attention to their request, not really thinking it through, just saying “no” because it felt like the easiest response in the moment, not because there was really a problem with what they were asking. But once I said it, I was stuck. Because I didn’t want to be the kind of person who would change her mind if my kids begged, pleaded, or whined. I wanted them to know that my no meant no. And if I said no, I had to enforce it. So sometimes I found myself enforcing a “no” even if I had decided that it would really have been okay if they had done whatever it was that they were wanting to do.

The benefit of this hardline response is that my kids knew growing up that begging, pleading, and certainly whining was going to get them nowhere. They learned what I wanted them to learn, to trust my word, to believe that I meant

what I said. I realize that this makes me sound like a very strict parent, but I don't think I was or am. In fact, I said yes and say yes a lot more than I say no. But when I say no, that's the end of it.

Unfortunately, this is not a lesson I've been able to instill in my dog, Haste, who, unlike my kids who know that whining will get them nowhere, believes that whining will get her everywhere. And she's often right, because what am I going to do? Send her to her room? Ground her? She's a dog and to my shock, many of my tried and true parenting strategies just don't work on her.

Of course, as the kids have gotten older, I've been less strict about enforcing a knee jerk "no" response. There's been more nuance to our interactions as they've grown up because I know that they have the capacity to understand that when I change my mind about something it doesn't mean that I'm unreliable. Usually, if I have to say no about something I explain why, hoping that they start to think about the big picture of their lives, their time, their safety, and the big picture of how their needs and wants fit into our family and the rest of our needs and obligations. And sometimes if I say no about something, and later realize that whatever it is they want is actually okay or will actually work out, I feel comfortable telling them, "I know I said no about that, but I've given it more thought and have decided that it is okay, or that it will work out with our family's schedule," or give them some other reason why my no turned into a yes. Because sometimes that happens.

I think that background of my parenting style is part of the reason why I've always been a little bit uncomfortable with today's gospel reading, which is often titled The Parable of the Unjust Judge, but that I like to call The Parable of the Persistent Woman.

In the parable Jesus tells the story of an interaction between an unjust judge and a persistent widow, who will not rest her case. The judge sounds like a thoroughly unpleasant fellow. He does not fear God, and he does not respect

people, and he certainly doesn't listen to the widow who applies to him for justice. She keeps coming to him for justice and he refuses her. He tells her no.

The parable seems to indicate that the widow had a good case, a solid case. It is not because she does not deserve justice that he denies her. It is because it's easier for him to tell her no than to do the right thing and grant her the justice she deserves.

But because she is persistent, because she keeps coming back, because she won't take no for an answer, the judge has a change of mind. It might sound like I should have just said, a change of heart, but the judge doesn't sound like much of a "heart" person to me. The judge had a change of mind, using this logic, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." (Luke 18:4-5)

The widow is persistent in what she wants, in making her claims and her demands for justice and finally she just wears the judge out and she gets what she wants and what she deserves.

Then Jesus compares this interaction to our relationship with God. This is parable about prayer (Luke 18:1), according to the narrator of the gospel. Jesus tells his disciples, God's chosen, to cry out to God, day and night. His point was that God will listen to the cries of God's people. God will not say no, will not deny justice, will not delay in answering the people's prayers.

Of course, the difference between the judge and the widow and me and my children, is exactly that. Back when I was busy enforcing my "no" with my very young children, it was because they were children and I wanted what was best for them, which included a stable relationship with a reliable mother. Which meant sometimes saying and enforcing a no. And, of course, as my children grew, my relationship with them changed, sometimes I would let them make a case, sometimes I would let them persuade me, when my first instinct was no. Sometimes

I would explain a change of heart and mind to them, based on my own reflection. Because I wanted to teach them to have agency in their lives, and I wanted them to learn how I made judgements about what was good, safe, healthy for them, so that they could start making good and safe and healthy choices for themselves and good and safe and healthy requests of me.

In the parable, the adult widow had a case for justice, and the judge had a responsibility to grant her that justice. But he was not doing that, not because she didn't have a case, but just because he didn't want to be bothered. But then when it became more bothersome for him to continue to have to deal with the persistent widow, he gave her the justice she wanted.

In comparing the judge to God, Jesus is not making a one-to-one comparison, he is not saying the God is like the unjust judge who couldn't be bothered to give the woman justice. He is saying that unlike the unjust judge who does not care about the woman crying out for justice, God does care about us. God treats us like adults, God treasures being in relationship with us, God listens to us when we cry out, and will and does respond to our cries, to our prayers.

Now I'm going to have us think about Jacob in our Old Testament reading for today, Jacob the trickster, Jacob the deceiver, Jacob the persistent. Jacob, who found a way to get what he wanted out of life, even if that way involved taking advantage of the people in his life, father, brother, father-in-law, who by the way, tricked him right back.

In today's Old Testament reading Jacob was on the edge of a life change, heading back home to his brother, Esau, the brother he had deceived out of birthright and blessing. He was going home, with his wives and his maids and his children and his herds and his servants, but he was worried. He didn't know what would happen when he and Esau came face to face. He didn't know what would happen when he had to face the brother he had wronged. He was at a crossroads in his life.

So, he waited on his side of the river and while he waited, he found himself wrestling with a man who was not just a man, a man who could not prevail against him, a man who he could not prevail against. Even after his opponent put Jacob's hip out of joint, Jacob still did not let go. Jacob, the persistent, held on and demanded a blessing. And the blessing the man who was not a man gave him included a change of name, Jacob became Israel, one who had striven with God and humans and who prevailed. Jacob named the place where he had wrestled with God "Peniel" for there he had seen God face to face and lived.

And then Jacob left that place, going to rejoin his wives and families, and he limped because of his encounter with God. His encounter with God had changed him. But not only in his limp. When Jacob encountered his brother, he found forgiveness and mercy, and he was able to reconcile with his brother. It was like he was a new man.

Our theme for our Stewardship campaign this year is the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And those things are our birthright as the people of God. The fruit of the Spirit is a blessing poured out on us because of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, planted in us in our baptisms, and growing in us throughout our lives.

Like Jacob, we are transformed by our encounter with God. And some might say we are hobbled by it, because this world is often not kind to those who move through it with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If you think about the kinds of behaviors and attitudes that are celebrated in today's culture, the traits, the virtues described as the fruit of the Holy Spirit, don't seem to be high on the list.

Kind of like you might think that Jacob, about to encounter a brother he had wronged, on the brother's home territory, might have been better equipped for that encounter with something other than a limp. But perhaps because of the limp Jacob had to approach Esau with humility and caution. He was not ready for

another fight. And that gave Esau a chance to do what he was always going to do. Embrace Jacob, welcome him, forgive him. And Jacob could only receive this unexpected, undeserved grace.

We too have been changed by our encounters with God. We are the chosen, called to bear the fruit of the Spirit in the world, called to inhabit our relationships, called to change the world not with force or violence, but with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, called to be persistent in prayer, called to cry out for justice, called to trust that God will answer, called to look for and be signs of God's goodness and God's justice, in the world. And Jesus tells us, we who are the called, the chosen, the beloved, the transformed of God, do not lose heart. Amen.