

GOOD NEWS: IT'S NOT ALL UP TO YOU

Exodus 18:13-26

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“I’ll do it myself!” is one of the first complete sentences many children utter. They want to be independent, and they take great pride in the first time they can dress themselves, or put on their own shoes, or ride a bike. And thus begins a journey of independence, a journey which is sometimes healthy and good, and sometimes detrimental. “Never mind, I’ll do it myself,” an exasperated person says, after waiting for someone else in the household to pitch in and help. Have you ever heard yourself sigh and then think to yourself, or say out loud, “I might as well do it myself...it will take just as long to tell someone else how.” Sometimes, let’s be honest, what you’re thinking is, “No one does this the way I do it.” How many spouses don’t like the way the other spouse does the laundry or mows the lawn? Sometimes it’s our quirkiness that keeps us so stubbornly independent. Sometimes it’s our pride. Taken to extreme, we become martyrs.

Do you know the feeling? You take so much on, and then, all of a sudden, you’re overwhelmed. You say “yes” too many times, and then you feel like a doormat. It’s so easy to become overcommitted and burned out, and then feel like you’re not doing anything well any more. It’s an epidemic in our society - the fast-paced, never-say-no, I’ll do it myself lifestyle. It can be fun and exhilarating, but also exhausting, and it’s unsustainable over the long haul. We’re going to talk about that today, and we’re going to hear a word of good news that comes from the biblical message.

But let me begin with a word of explanation. This sermon is not in the category of self-help. Oh, I do hope it helps you feel that you can live a more healthy, well-balanced life. I do hope it helps you gain a better grasp on when to say “yes” and when to say “no.” But a sermon is not a self-help presentation. A sermon should always address the spiritual questions. You can pick up self-help articles at the newsstand. There is a spiritual problem I hope to address today,

and it is this. When we're over-committed, over-hurried, when we can't say "no", when we can't delegate and see the gifts of other people, we can't serve God well.

There are a whole host of reasons why we say 'yes' - we want to be helpful, we want our lives to make a difference for good in the world. We sometimes think, "Well, if i don't do it, who will?" And sometimes we want the acclaim, the praise, the thanks, the spotlight. It's all part of being human - we are all a combination of good intentions and needs. None of us has completely pure and unselfish motivations all the time. The key to living well and faithfully is being intentional, thoughtful and reflective about what we're saying 'yes' to and what we're saying 'no' to.

Imagine that your life is a box. In that box is everything that represents your life and the way you spend your 168 hours a week, 52 weeks a year. So in your box are the people who mean the most to you, some of whom you've made a commitment to. Your responsibilities are in your box - either paid or volunteer work. Your hobbies, the things that bring you joy, the gifts you feel God has called you to develop. Your faith, your commitment to church and perhaps to other organizations, boards you serve on. If your box is full, then you can't say 'yes' to anything new without saying 'no' to something that's already in your box. It's a simple concept, but one we often forget:

Every 'yes' to something is a 'no' to something else. When your life is full, the only way you can say "yes" to something is to say "no" to something else. So how do we decide? When to say 'yes' and when to say 'no'? How do we become more intentional about the way we want to spend our time? How do we make the best possible choices?

One of my favorite books, and it would qualify as a self-help book, is called The Art of Possibility. It's written by a husband-wife team. She was a psychotherapist, he was the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic. They tell this wonderful story in their book:

Two Prime ministers were sitting in a room discussing affairs of state. Suddenly a man bursts in, apoplectic with fury, shouting and stamping and banging his fist on the desk. The

resident prime minister admonishes him: "Peter," he says, "kindly remember Rule Number 6," whereupon Peter is instantly restored to complete calm, apologizes, and withdraws. The politicians return to their conversation, only to be interrupted yet again twenty minutes later by an hysterical woman gesticulating wildly, her hair flying. Again the intruder is greeted with the words: "Marie, please remember Rule Number 6." Complete calm descends once more, and she too withdraws with a bow and an apology. When the scene is repeated for a third time, the visiting prime minister addresses his colleague: "My dear friend, I've seen many things in my life, but never anything as remarkable as this. Would you be willing to share with me the secret of this Rule Number 6?" "Very simple," replies the resident prime minister. "Rule Number 6 is 'Don't take yourself so darn seriously.'" "Ah," says his visitor, "that is a fine rule." After a moment of pondering, he inquires, "And what, may I ask, are the other rules?" ... "There aren't any."

That is one of life's rules - don't take yourself so seriously that you think the world is riding on your shoulders, and on your shoulders alone.

A lot of people in the Bible struggle with this - one of them none other than Moses himself. He's called by God to lead the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land. He leads them out through the Red Sea, and he brings down the law, down from Mt. Sinai, and he has it in his mind that he's the only person God can speak through. He's taking himself so darn seriously. And so what begins to happen is that he's trying to do everything himself. And the end result is that he doesn't do anything very well. There are lines of people outside his tent, every day. Sometimes the line looks like the lines at Cedar Point - a line that wraps around his tent. People are waiting to see Moses because they need his permission to do certain things. They need him to give his judgment, to settle disputes. Moses woke up every day feeling his heart burdened. I know that some of you wake up like that too. A knot in your stomach before the day even begins because you know that you won't be able to do all of the things you're supposed to do that day. You know that there are problems you won't be able to solve. Moses wakes up with this every single day.

One day his father-in-law, Jethro, comes to visit, and he sees these people lined up outside Moses' tent. He observes Moses trying to deal personally with every single person and he says, "Moses, (speaking on behalf of God), This is no way to go about it. You'll burn out, and the people right along with you. This is way too much for you—you can't do this alone. Now listen to me. Let me tell you how to do this so that God will be in this with you. Be there for the people before God, but let the matters of concern be presented to God. Your job is to teach them the rules and instructions, to show them how to live, what to do. And then you need to keep a sharp eye out for competent men—men who fear God, men of integrity, men who are incorruptible—and appoint them as leaders over groups organized by the thousand, by the hundred, by fifty, and by ten. They'll be responsible for the everyday work of judging among the people. They'll bring the hard cases to you, but in the routine cases they'll be the judges. They will share your load and that will make it easier for you. If you handle the work this way, you'll have the strength to carry out whatever God commands you, and the people in their settings will flourish also."

Now I imagine that Moses' first reaction was to defend himself. "Jethro, you don't understand...Nobody can do this quite like I can ... if I have to train people, it will take me twice as long" ... he'd have a whole list of reasons and excuses why he can't follow Jethro's, and God's, instructions. Because it's hard to give up things. We know what he was feeling and thinking. Nobody can do it like I can. Yet Moses also knew that the way he was living was unhealthy, and unsustainable over the long haul, and not good for him or his community.

So, Exodus tells us, "Moses listened to the counsel of his father-in-law and did everything he said. Moses picked competent men from all Israel and set them as leaders over the people who were organized by the thousand, by the hundred, by fifty, and by ten. They took over the everyday work of judging among the people. They brought the hard cases to Moses, but in the routine cases they were the judges."

Jethro says to Moses, "Moses, don't take yourself so darned seriously. There are other people who can do this." And here's what we know happens, in all areas of our life. I know it

happens in the church. When one person relinquishes an area of responsibility, it creates space for other people, more people, to discover what they have to offer, to find the joy of service, to feel a sense of belonging. It's not all up to us. Leadership and responsibility are best when they're shared.

One of the best attributes of this congregation is our Stephen Ministry program. I give credit to my predecessor who brought it to our church, and to the family of Catherine Walker, who established an endowment to pay for it. I give thanks for the dozens upon dozens of people who have served as Stephen Ministers and Leaders over the decades. Because of Stephen Ministry, countless hours are given in caring and listening than if I tried to meet all of those needs by myself.

A good question to ask ourselves is this, "What are the things that only I can do?" You may find it's a lot less than you'd expect. What are the things that I must do and must do well? And what are the things that other people can do? It involves some introspection, some reflection - the kind of inner work I talked about last week - perfect for the winter time...look deep within yourself and think about your mission and purpose.

So we understand that we should delegate, bring out the gifts of other people, say "no". But it's saying "no" so that we can "yes" to our greater purpose.

In the gospel of Luke, a man asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (The kind of abundant life God wants for us - which begins now - and continues on after our death.) He's saying, "What do I have to say 'yes' to?" Jesus says, "You're a lawyer, you know the law. What does the scripture say?" "To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said, "Do these things and you will live." Then the man asks, "Well, who is my neighbor?" He wants to know who does he have to say 'yes' to? And who can he say 'no' to? It's a legitimate question. Jesus says, "Let me tell you a story." A man is robbed and left for dead by the side of the road. The first person to see him is a priest. The priest says, "You know, I just have to say 'no' to some things. My life is full already. So he

walks on by.” The Levite, a religious worker, also passes by. “You know, I can’t say ‘yes’ to everything.” But the Samaritan, part of a despised race, instantly knows he has to say ‘yes.’ He’ll say ‘no’ to whatever appointment he has down the road, because this is more important. This is what life is all about. Loving your neighbor. He stops, he bandages the man’s wounds, takes him to an inn, and even leaves money for his future care.

“Which of these is the neighbor?” Jesus says. “The Samaritan, of course.” Then go and do likewise.”

Am I saying each of us has to stop, every single day, for every single request? No. But there will be times in each of our lives, when we’re called on, when we least expect it. If our lives are so full of our own concerns, we won’t be able to say ‘yes’ in those moments.

Did you ever stop and think about how the Samaritan felt when he left the inn that day? After he had helped the man, bandaged his wounds, paid for his health care? Do you think he was resentful? “What a drag, that just set me back quite a bit of time and money.” Most likely he was energized. He knew that he had been a part of God’s work in the world.

There are some things we have to do, we have to say ‘yes’ to that drain us. But there are other things that make us feel fully alive. When we are serving, when we are loving others, it fills us with joy and purpose.

When we create time to do God’s work, that ‘yes’ is a greater yes. It recharges us, renew us, and reminds us of what it means to be authentically human.

This is the good news. It’s not all up to us. Trust that the people around you all have gifts and talents, and that if we all tap into our God-given potential, the world will work as it should. And when we find room in our lives for love and service, the joy lets us know that we have said ‘yes’ to just the right thing.

Source for this sermon: The Rev. Adam Hamilton