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Newport News, Virginia
February 22, 2009

The Power of "Yes"
2 Corinthians 1:18-22

When I was a child, a catchy Johnny Mercer song was sometimes heard over the radio. Its lyrics might have been appropriate background music for today's section of Paul's letters to the church at Corinth. The words were combined with a syncopated rhythm that made the song even more compelling.

*You've got to a-ccen-tuate the positive
e-li-minate the negative
latch on to the affirmative and
don't mess with Mister In-Between*

*You've got to spread joy up to the maximum
bring gloom down to the minimum
Have faith or pandemonium's
liable to walk upon the scene*

A teachable moment for me came during an executive level staff meeting when an issue at the seminary came up in conversation. I carefully outlined the different elements of the issue. When I finished, the president said, "I hear the problem; I don't hear a solution."

While Mercer's song can be blown-off as simplistic and unrealistic, it keeps popping up from time to time, whether by Aretha Franklin, Willie Nelson, or Clint Eastwood. There is something powerful about looking for the good rather than the bad, focusing on solutions rather than over-articulating the problems.

Christianity is not a negative religion, though some have tried to make it out to be so. "...in him it is always 'Yes,'" Paul said.

"I have come that you might life—life in all of its fullness," Jesus said. (John 10:10) "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength," we hear him say, "and love your neighbor as you love yourself." (Mark 12:30)

Perhaps the parable that most vividly illustrates the affirmative quality in Christ is about the empty house. A man drove the devil out of his house, swept the room, and cleaned up the place from cellar to attic. Then one day the devil

came back, peeped in to see who lived there and saw nothing but bare walls and emptiness. So, the devil moved in again, and brought with him seven of his cronies, each with ten servants. While embellished a bit, there is no vagueness about the message Jesus was trying to get across. One's life cannot be built on all the "Nos," "Nots," and "Don'ts." You have to say "Yes" to something; you have to stand *for* something.

Paul wrote as many as seven letters to the Corinthian church,¹ most contained in what we know as first and second Corinthians. To fully understand his words in today's text, we would need to read the previous chapters in first Corinthians. Paul was actually responding to the complaints of the church he helped establish in Corinth as they accused him of waffling about when he was going to visit them, he launched into a much broader theology of life in Christ. The power of the "Yes" found in Christ is liberating. Paul's teachings never stop with "no." "Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness," Peterson paraphrases his words in Galatians. (Galatians 5:16)

The Greeks had a story about Ulysses and the sirens (winged, beautiful females) who sang so sweetly that sailors could not resist steering toward their island. Many ships were lured upon the rocks and sailors forgot home, duty, and honor as they flung themselves into the sea to be embraced by arms that drew them down to death. Sailors could manage to sail by the sirens safely only if they could say "no" to them. At first Ulysses lashed himself tightly to the mast and his crew stuffed their ears with wax, but finally they learned a better way to save themselves—they took on board their own better music. When Orpheus sang, who bothered to listen to the voices of the sirens?²

One of my all-time favorite movies is the Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt "As Good as It Gets." Melvin Udall, played by Nicholson, is a writer, lives by himself in an apartment building, is obsessive-compulsive, homophobic, and in general negative about everything. He regularly berates his gay artist neighbor,

¹ John W. Riggs, "Theological Perspective" on 2 Corinthians:1:18-22, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press: 2008), 374.

² J. Wallace Hamilton, *The Thunder of Bare Feet* (Westwood, NJ, Fleming H Revell Company: 1964), 140.

Simon Bishop, and despises his Simon's little dog, Verdell. After his neighbor is beaten and robbed, Melvin is somewhat forced to "dog sit" Verdell during the neighbor's hospitalization. Quickly, the little dog wins his heart and Melvin's affection for Verdell begins to overcome his otherwise dark life. One symbolic scene has Melvin playing his grand piano and singing Monty Python's "Look on the Bright Side of Life" to his new little friend .

My mom used to have gift for turning an unhappy child's attention toward something positive, delightful, or curious. I've seen her distract the negative in one of her grandchildren and bring about a smile and a changed attitude.

Years ago, a sheepman in Indiana was troubled by his neighbors' dogs which were killing his sheep. Such problems were often settled with a lawsuit, barbed-wire fences, or a shotgun. This sheepman went to work on his neighbor with a more creative plan. To every neighbor's child he gave a lamb or two as pets. Within time, all of his neighbors tied up their dogs and his problem was solved.

The Quakers summed up this philosophy of life long ago with the saying, "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness," which is another way of saying that "the power of life is in the 'yes' and not the 'nos.'"

Everyday we hear more news of how bad the economy is or how another major figure in the nation has been caught scamming citizens. We are in tough times. But, our struggle is not primarily with the economy or politics or wars that rage around the world. Our struggle is with the selfishness and fears that cause such attitudes and lead to such events. If we choose to use the energy we waste complaining about our problems or attacking others with a different viewpoint, or feeding our selfish lifestyles, and instead offer solutions to the problems and bridge our differences, we will experience renewed energy that lifts us all to a higher ethic of living.

None of us wants to be pushed or driven to change. But, we can be drawn or pulled in a healthier direction. Earlier this week, I read a good example of this kind of leadership from a former President, Dwight Eisenhower. One morning he sat with his Cabinet. Someone wanted the President to forcefully crack down on an issue. Eisenhower took a piece of string from the drawer and laid it on his

desk. "Look," he said, "if I try to push this string, it won't go anywhere. But if I pull it, I can take it anywhere I want."

Paul said, "For the Son of God, Jesus Christ...was not "Yes and No"; but in him it is always "Yes." Dag Hammarskjold was a quiet Christian mystic. He was also the Secretary General of the United Nations from 1957 until his death in 1961. From his personal journal were found the defining words of his life: "For all that has been, Thanks; for all that will by, Yes." So may it be for us, as well.

2 Corinthians 1:18-22

As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been "Yes and No." For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not "Yes and No"; but in him it is always "Yes." For in him every one of God's promises is a "Yes." For this reason it is through him that we say the "Amen," to the glory of God. But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first

Mark 9:2-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.