

“JUST SAY NO,” Remember that slogan? It was part of a campaign years ago, trying to teach school-aged children how and when to say the word “no” to drugs and alcohol. I don’t think it was very successful. It has always been much easier to say “yes” to something that looks appealing, than to say “no.” Yet saying “no” can often be the right choice. A well-timed “no” can shape our destiny just as much as those defining moments when we say “yes.” As Steve Jobs – founder of Apple Computers - once said about his company, *“Our success comes from saying “no” to 1,000 things to make sure we don't get on the wrong track or try to do too much. I'm as proud of what we don't do as I am of what we do.”*

So, sometimes, saying “no” is a step in the right direction because it prevents us going down the wrong direction. In the big picture of the universe it probably makes no difference which of Baskin Robins 31 flavors you choose. But other choices can affect the whole path and outcome of our lives and the right answer is a simple “no.”

But then are other times when we are offered a more challenging path for our lives, though it is often more risky, or requires more sacrifice. And unfortunately many times we have said “no” to that opportunity instead of “yes.” All of us can think of those times in our lives, times when we were so wrapped up in our own plans that we did not recognize this higher calling, or we were just so selfish that we just refused it. These moments may be as simple as a child tugging at our pants leg wanting some of our attention and love,

or maybe it was a choice between a career that makes lots of money instead of one that could do lots of good or maybe it was as serious as a decision to protect an innocent life or treat it as just an obstacle to my plans.

A guard in charge of a lighthouse along a dangerous coast was given enough oil for one month and told to keep the light burning every night. One day a woman asked for oil so that her children could stay warm. Then a farmer came. His son needed oil for a lamp so he could read. Another needed some for an engine. The guard saw each as a worthy request and gave each some oil. By the end of the month, the tank in the lighthouse was dry. That night the beacon was dark and three ships crashed on the rocks. More than one hundred lives were lost. Placed on trial, lighthouse attendant explained what he had done and why. But the prosecutor replied, "You were given only one task: to keep the light burning. Every other thing was secondary. You have no excuse."

We would like to think that temptation is a choice between good and evil. But most of the time we are presented with options good in themselves and we are tempted to forget what matters, what our priorities really are. The longer we live, the more we realize that most of us have said "no" to some of the greatest moments in life, squandering them for an easier path, or burying them under a mountain of secondary concerns that seemed urgent at the time.

Faith tells us that it is often the whisper of God behind the invitation to that path less chosen. It was God offering a choice between that apparently sensible safe path we have mapped out for ourselves,

or a different path that leads to the fulfillment of our life's purpose, and brings our greatest joy. And yet we still say "no," even when it is God's voice inviting us to the higher calling for our lives.

In our more reflective moments we might wonder, "How could anyone say "no" to God?" Well honestly, it isn't difficult if we are fixated on our own plans and schemes. People have been saying "no" to God as far back as Adam and Eve. Just look at our Gospel lesson for today. An entire town in Samaria refused to allow Jesus and his band of disciples to even enter their village, just because they were Jews headed to Jerusalem. Samaritans and Jews in first century Palestine got along about as well as Palestinians and Jews get along today. It's too bad for the people of that Samaritan village. Saying "no" to Jesus probably left a leper in that town trapped in his disease, or a child tormented by her demon, or a sinful person trapped in their misery.

Everywhere Jesus went, he changed the population for good, and pointed them to an entirely new relationship with God. Just imagine what a difference it would have made if they had allowed Jesus to come to their town! A golden moment – lost...forever.

And then while continuing on his journey, three would-be followers approached Jesus as candidates to join the group of disciples. Two of the three had not thought through the rigors and sacrifice following Jesus would entail. Their offers sounded genuine enough, but Jesus did not just want an entourage or groupies, he needed men and women who had counted the cost, and would be willing to take up a cross to follow him.

But to one of them Jesus offered the simple and powerful invitation, “Follow me.” This was the same phrase he used when he called Simon Peter and Andrew from their nets, the same phrase he used to call Matthew from his tax collecting booth. We are amazed as we read how those apostles just left behind the lives, the careers, and the families they knew in order to follow Christ. But Jesus didn’t cast a magic spell over them that they couldn’t resist. This unnamed person in our Gospel received the very same call, with the very same words, and yet refused our Lord’s calling, clinging instead to a sensible, but self-focused, calling for his life. Imagine that — saying “no” to Jesus! And yet he did it. And we do it too.

Notice that Jesus did not call down fire on the Samaritan village when they refused to receive him. And Jesus did not strike down these three would-be disciples who failed the test to be one of his followers. Actually I am sure it grieved his heart to see someone cling to a narrow life, when God had such greater plans for them. But Jesus knew that the possibility and freedom of a real “no” to God is the only way a “yes” to Him has any real worth.

This was the way God created humankind from the very beginning, with the freedom of will to choose between the path God offers and the one we devise ourselves. Of course, our track record with this freedom isn’t too good, but aren’t you glad God allowed humans to be free, rather than program us as robots to obey? We all have a real choice when it comes to obeying the calling of God on our lives. It is actually possible to say “no” to God, even though not wise.

But the possibility of that “no” is the reason there is such joy in heaven and on earth whenever one of us hears the calling of God, and then with complete freedom and humility says a simple “yes.”

“Yes” or “No” it seems so deceptively simple but it changes the course of our lives and perhaps of our world. “Yes” or “No” – yet we keep hoping, trying to find a middle ground where the consequences aren’t so drastic, the commitment isn’t so encompassing. Lots of folk suffer from the “but-first” syndrome. That’s not a description of how to sit in a chair; it is the attitude of continually making excuses why this isn’t a good time to make a commitment to the Lord. You know... I would but first I have to do this, but first I want to accomplish that. But eventually we all find out there is no middle ground and the life we live either says “Yes” or “no” to the only question that ever really mattered – the lord’s question in today’s gospel: “Will you follow me?”