

“Saying No, Saying Yes”
October 23, 2022

Isaiah 2:1-5
II Corinthians 1:18-21

As I was preparing my preaching schedule for this fall, I intentionally left this Sunday “open.” In the mid-summer I had no idea what would drive my sermon this morning. I knew it wouldn’t be a Minor Prophet. (We’ll come back to the last three of those when we consider Haggai next Sunday.) And it wouldn’t be stewardship and generosity. (Although I’m always eager to talk about those aspects of our life of faith.)

I was sure that something would arise that needed attention.

Something always does.

And as Election Day approaches, there is something I’d like to address.

It’s an issue that arose in an email exchange that involved a few members of one of our church boards and me. And, as always, I want to assure you that I have permission to talk about these emails. Nothing anyone writes or says to me turns into sermon material without such permission.

Let me first say this, however: If you are not a member of a church board, you probably want to be. Our Nominating Committee will no doubt be glad to hear me say that, as they are currently seeking to fill all our boards for next year. But I don’t say this simply to curry favor with the Nominating Committee.

The boards of our church provide servant leadership to the entire congregation and equip all of us for ministry and mission in our community. Because of this, board meetings are filled with honest communication, respectful listening and speaking, and principled disagreement. Members discuss all kinds of topics with openness and imagination and intelligence. As I said last week, one sign of a healthy congregation is that the congregation is in earnest dialogue about what is important.

By that standard, we are very healthy.

So, when the Nominating Committee calls, say “Yes”—for your own good as well as for the good of the congregation.

But back to my point: the health of our congregation was shown earlier this month in an email exchange that centered around a yard sign.

There is a question on the November ballot about amending the Iowa Constitution to require any gun laws in the state to be evaluated by “strict scrutiny”—what a UI law professor called “the toughest test, the most skeptical test that you can ask of a restriction.” It means any state laws that are seen as restricting gun rights would be more likely to be struck down by a court.¹

I think this is an unwise amendment.

I agree with Linn County Attorney Nick Maybanks, who calls this “a wolf in sheep’s clothing” because it could make it harder for lawmakers to pass gun control laws in the future. Maybanks says: “This amendment is not about freedom. It’s about more senseless violence. This

amendment is not about embracing any rights. It's about seizing power from future generations."²

Again, I think this is an unwise amendment that should be defeated.

You might disagree—and that's perfectly acceptable.

Some in our congregation strongly oppose the amendment and earlier this month a member of one of our boards suggested that we put a sign in our small churchyard to express our disapproval.

You might have seen this sign in the yards of some of your neighbors. It reads: "Vote No—Public Measure 1—Reckless Gun Amendment." That's not an exhaustive examination of the issues involved. It's just a sign.

Our neighbors over at Gloria Dei were considering putting up this sign. Apparently, the Unitarians out in Coralville had already done so. And perhaps we had set a precedent for doing so ourselves. After all, several years ago, we had that banner hanging on the Jefferson Street side of our church that condemned torture.

I had concerns.

I didn't think that we as a congregation can or should post a sign that specifically tells people how to vote on an issue. I also thought that the mid-sixties "Johnson Amendment" might jeopardize our non-profit tax status if we did.

Here's the important difference between this "Vote No" sign and the "Torture Mars the Image of God" banner: One advocates a specific position on an issue up for a vote. The other affirms a specific theological perspective.

Advocacy vs. affirmation.

So, I concluded that it was probably best not to put up the sign. My opinion was not the final word, of course—that is neither how our congregation is structured nor how I understand ministry.

Well, you know how people in our congregation can be.

The member responded by pointing out that the sign was created by Iowans for Responsible Gun Laws, an organization that includes Catholic, United Methodist, and Unitarian congregations as well as Plymouth UCC in Des Moines and the entire Episcopal Dioceses of Iowa.

More importantly, the member asked, how do we as a congregation or as part of the larger church say "No" when faced with injustice or violence or, well, *evil*?

This member wrote: "I've been thinking about Nazi Germany, South Africa during apartheid, the Black Churches in the South in the 50's and 60's. I know many Black Churches were burned for saying No. I don't know how many churches publicly opposed apartheid or the Nazis. I expect many were silent," and concluded, "I need to belong to a church that has the ability to say No."

Wow! Is this a great congregation or what? That kind of open, thoughtful, and respectful response is typical of the way we talk through things here.

The final line of the email read: “I am interested in your thoughts.”

So, I had to think.

This congregation is always making me think.

With Reformation Sunday at the end of this month, October is a good time to think of both the No and the Yes that Protestantism speaks.

John Calvin reminded us that the human mind is a factory of idols. There is a human tendency to make just about anything sacred—even though it is not God. Recognizing this, Protestants have always been willing to question authority—including the authority of the church and of tradition. The “No” of Protestantism is important because it contains the divine and human protest against *any* absolute claim made for a relative reality—guns, the flag, even the claims of a Protestant church.³ Protestantism places healthy restraints on the human tendency to deify any system or people. When the state, the church, the economy, or anything else seeks to be absolute, we say: “No!”

The “No” of Protestantism is important and sometimes we must speak it loudly.

But Protestantism also has a “Yes.” By the grace of God—and by God’s grace alone—the unrighteous are made righteous, the sinner is justified (and, yes, I’m talking about you and me here). Even the word “protest” suggests this, as its first meaning is “to state positively, to affirm solemnly.” As a result, at our best, we are always looking for new ways of being faithful people in changing times. Out of the Protestant Reformation came key Western values—social reform, individual religious conviction, hard work, and the rejection of corruption, hypocrisy, and empty ritual.⁴

It’s a challenging tradition. We haven’t gotten it right at all times and in all places, but saying both No and Yes is an important part of who we are.

When Blacks and Black churches in the South were attacked—as much for saying Yes to equality as for saying No to segregation, churches and church members, including the young Ed Heininger—who would later pastor this congregation—came to their support.

There was significant opposition to apartheid from the churches, both inside South Africa and globally. Desmond Tutu and the Anglican Church are the most well-known, but we should remember, too, that the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (of which the UCC is a member) condemned apartheid as heresy and expelled the Dutch Reformed Church from its members because of that church’s support of apartheid.

And while opposition to Nazism was nowhere near what it should have been in churches in Germany or abroad, we remember the strong and courageous stances of leaders such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemoeller and their churches.

I found it interesting that a quick look at the Plymouth UCC and Episcopal Diocese websites gave no information at all about the proposed amendment. It’s also interesting that the Iowa UCC conference is not a part of this coalition. And while the local Unitarians had a “Vote No” sign posted, they don’t get a lot of traffic driving by—nor have I found any more information on their website. And apparently a Unitarian member objected to the sign for some reason, most

likely procedural, so it has been taken down. So there's not a real strong, easily heard "No" from these congregations.

Perhaps Reinhold Niebuhr was right when he said that institutions cannot be moral—only individuals.

I also did some checking and found that I was wrong (no surprise there). The Johnson Amendment prohibits non-profits, including churches, from endorsing political candidates. It seems that it does not prohibit the endorsement of or opposition to, say, a constitutional amendment. So, in that respect a yard sign might be possible. And, of course, if we were to post a sign we would have the backing of the executive order issued by the defender of freedom, Donald Trump. On May 4, 2017, Trump signed the "Presidential Executive Order Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty." Trump's executive order does not repeal the Johnson Amendment, nor does it allow ministers to endorse from the pulpit, but it does halt the enforcement of its consequences.

Yes, life is strange.

This member also identified a "problem:" As a congregation, we have no process in place to say either Yes or No. We called a meeting of the entire congregation before ordering and hanging the "Torture Banner." It seems that we rely on the general "liberal" bent of our congregation and a sense that we are all of one mind—which is probably not the case.

We are a church that can say both yes and no depending on the circumstances and the issue. It's important to find the way to say this that will be heard and will be effective. Will that be a yard sign? A sermon? A protest?

When I sent my thoughts off to a few people, the member responded: "Your note is wonderful. You might consider a sermon on these issues—you have a very good start."

Maybe so.

In the hope that this is the case, on this open Sunday in my preaching schedule, let me just add a concluding thought to this "good start," knowing that there is much more to be said.

It is vitally important for the church and for individual congregations such as ours to raise our voices—and maybe our yard signs as well—in the face of injustice, or actions that mar the image of God, or violence, or the other evils that we find in the world. Sometime we need to say "No!"

But more often, I think, we need to find the "Yes" that is our hope and desire and give voice to it.

You see, there's something about the human mind that tends to overlook the negatives in our language. You know what that's like. We're told: "Don't do this," but what we hear is "Do this."

So, what happened when a "Stop the Violence" softball game was held? You guessed it—a fight broke out.

When we say "No," when we are "Against" or "Anti," when we say "Stop," this or that, the human psyche tends to move swiftly toward the very thing we would oppose.

"In God it is always Yes," Paul tells us.

What is our “Yes?” Sometimes getting to that “Yes” is the most difficult part of our work. But this congregation does not shy away from the difficult or demanding.

Let us seek and move toward the Yes that grows out of God’s “Yes” to human well-being and flourishing.

Oh. And do consider joining a church board and adding your voice to our continuing conversation.

¹ <https://www.iowapublicradio.org/ipr-news/2022-10-19/gun-rights-amendment-2022-election-ballot>

² Ibid.

³ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*

⁴ Back cover of *Protestants*, by Steven Ozment