

Sermon: "If I Don't Do It..."
Scripture: Exodus 18:13-26
Date: Sunday, January 28, 2018
Preacher: Rev. Becky Stephens Smithey

I know that I usually begin this time with the reading of the Scripture that will guide the message. I'm going to do things a little differently this morning, though, because both of these Scripture readings are stories that will help move the message forward. This morning we continue with our three-week sermon series begun last week called "Hanging in There When the World Is Pulling You Down." Throughout these three weeks we will be considering our often crazy lives, and how the wisdom of the Bible and the teachings of Jesus can help us keep things in balance.

Last week, we were reminded of the Sabbath commandment, and our obligation to create space in our lives for resting and re-connecting with God. And so as we continue today, we are going to consider how it is, exactly, that we can structure our lives in a way that is consistent with the will and commands of our God.

You know, there are lots of things that we can get more of. If we need clothes, we can go to the department store. We can go to the grocery store or into the garden when we need more food. If we need more money, we can try and find more work. But there's almost nothing we can do if we need more time. We are totally limited when it comes to the hours and day we have to work with. There are 24 hours in a day, and that's it. There's nowhere we can go to "pick up" more time. There's nothing we can do to buy more time. We've got to work with what we've got, and that's 168 hours a week.

So this week, I did a little project. I made a 24-hour box. When we think of time as a box, it becomes easy to see what fills our time, and when we've run out. So, I started to fill my box. I put in a pillow. Of course, we all need to sleep, and that takes a good chunk of our time each day. I've got a plate and cup in here to represent meal time. Then there's my family, I've some pictures of them in here. And work; my work is represented by this chalice and the UM Book of Discipline. I'm a Christ follower, so I've got my cross and Bible in here because I try the best I can through devotion and service to live that out every day. Then there's my friends, I like to spend time with them, too. When I have some spare time, I like to relax with a book or take Olivia on a bike ride; hobbies take time, too.

You can see how quickly our time fills up. And you can also see how when the box gets full, there's nowhere else to put stuff. Of course, the same is true of our time. We all have 168 hours per week, and once you fill it up, you can't get anything else in there. So today, we're going to think about how to use our time wisely, and it basically boils down to this; we have to say "no" sometimes so that we can say "yes" to the more important things. If you're going to put something more in the box, then something has to come out. If you're going to say "Yes" to one thing, then you have to be ready to say "no" to something else. Or if you simply say "yes to everything then some things just start to fall out of the box. And so the question is, what are you saying "no" to, and is that something you're willing to let go? Because if we just keep trying to jam stuff in, we can get overwhelmed pretty quickly; listen to Moses' predicament.

[Read Exodus 18:13-26]

¹³ The next day Moses sat as a judge for the people, while the people stood around Moses from morning until evening. ¹⁴ When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What's this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people are standing around you from morning until evening?"

¹⁵ Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. ¹⁶ When a conflict arises between them, they come to me and I judge between the two of them. I also teach them God's regulations and instructions."

¹⁷ Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing isn't good. ¹⁸ You will end up totally wearing yourself out, both you and these people who are with you. The work is too difficult for you. You can't do it alone. ¹⁹ Now listen to me and let me give you some advice. And may God be with you! Your role should be to represent the people before God. You should bring their disputes before God yourself. ²⁰ Explain the regulations and instructions to them. Let them know the way they are supposed to go and the things they are supposed to do. ²¹ But you should also look among all the people for capable persons who respect God. They should be trustworthy and not corrupt. Set these persons over the people as officers of groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. ²² Let them sit as judges for the people at all times. They should bring every major dispute to you, but they should decide all of the minor cases themselves. This will be much easier for you, and they will share your load. ²³ If you do this and God directs you, then you will be able to endure. And all these people will be able to go back to their homes much happier."

So here is Moses; God has given the Ten Commandments and the Law to the people through Moses, and now Moses sits as the sole arbiter of the law. From morning to night every single day, people line up to receive advice and judgment on the law from Moses. He's the only one making these judgments, and it's the only thing he's doing all day long. Can you imagine what that must be like? Well, you probably can because we do the same thing in our own lives. Anyway, Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, shows up and he sees what Moses is doing. And he essentially looks at Moses and says, "You're crazy! People are lined up around your tent from morning to night, and it's only going to get worse. This is idiotic! You can't do this by yourself!"

But that was the problem to begin with, wasn't it? Moses did think he could do it all by himself; he felt like he was the only one who was in touch with God, he thought he was the only one capable of doing that particular job. And don't we do the same thing? So often we think, "I'm the only person who can do that." And so we say "yes." As if life wouldn't go on if we said "no." And then, potentially, because we couldn't say "no," other people who could've had a new opportunity, and maybe even done a better job than us, are denied that because we said "yes" to something we didn't need to say "yes" to. And then to top it all off, we drive ourselves crazy trying to fit in another thing we didn't need to fit in anyway, and the next thing you know we're complaining about how busy we are and how we can never get anything done!

There's a story told of a former British Prime Minister, who was frequently interrupted with "important" business. This was known to happen while he was on the phone, working on

reports, and even in meetings. The person who tells this story was in a meeting with the Prime Minister one time and observed as a young clerk came running into the room. “Prime Minister,” he said, “I’ve been working all night on this document you’ve asked for. I think I’ve finally got it all ready, you need to look over it and sign off.” Calmly, the Prime Minister looked away from what was happening in his meeting and said to the young man, “Remember Rule #6.”

“Oh, yes sir, Prime Minister,” said the man meekly as he tucked the report under his arm and left the room.

A little while later a woman came rushing into the room, sweat glistening on her forehead. “Prime Minister, these people have been calling all morning. I’ve been trying to answer their questions, but they insist they must speak to you now!” Again, the Prime Minister calmly stopped the meeting, looked over at the woman and said, “Remember Rule #6.” Immediately the look of panic left the woman’s face, she nodded, and walked calmly out of the room. This happened a few more times, and finally, the man in the meeting asked, “Prime Minister, what exactly is Rule #6?”

“Don’t take yourself so darn seriously.” The Prime Minister answered matter-of-factly.

“Well,” asked the man, “What are the other five rules?”

“There aren’t any, that’s the only one,” said the Prime Minister.

For Moses, it took a lecture from his father-in-law, a third-party observer who quickly saw that Moses was trying to do something all by himself that really could be done much better and more efficiently if more people were brought in to help. He was taking himself too seriously. Really, Moses need handle only the serious cases. And so today, we have our third party observer, God’s wisdom shared with us in the stories of the Bible. We need to step back, take a look at our lives, and see where we are taking ourselves a bit too seriously. Each of us has to figure out for ourselves, what are those things that no one else can do, that we really HAVE to do. You see, the thing is, God gives us permission to say “no.” But life is not just about saying “no,” it’s about saying “no” to some things so that we can say “yes” to the more important things.

Obviously, the next logical question is, “What are the more important things? What is it that I need to make sure I’m always able to say ‘yes’ to?” Well, it turns out a lawyer had just such a question for Jesus.

[Read Luke 10:25-37]

²⁵ *A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to gain eternal life?”*

²⁶ *Jesus replied, “What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?”*

²⁷ *He responded, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”^[a]*

²⁸ *Jesus said to him, “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.”*

²⁹ *But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”*

³⁰ *Jesus replied, “A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. ³¹ Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. ³² Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. ³³ A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. ³⁴ The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day, he took two full days’ worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, ‘Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs.’ ³⁶ What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?”*

³⁷ *Then the legal expert said, “The one who demonstrated mercy toward him.”*

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

When the lawyer says, “What must I do to gain eternal life,” basically what he’s asking Jesus is, what do I have to say “yes” to? ...And then when the legal expert persists by asking “Who is my neighbor?” He’s again essentially saying; who do I have to say “yes” to, and who can I say “no” to?

Jesus’ answer is this parable with which we are so familiar. And here’s today’s lesson from this parable, one that is perhaps a bit different from our usual take away. God wants us to enjoy the life he has given us, “to glorify God and enjoy him forever” as the Westminster Catechism puts it. That means, in essence, that God expects us to say “yes” to some things, and the only way we can do that is by saying “no” to the less important things. And the Samaritan did that. In fact, the Samaritan was the only one who did that. Do you think the Samaritan went home that night and was disappointed in himself? I doubt it. I think because the Samaritan said “yes” to this man’s need, because he loved his neighbor, he felt fully alive, he experienced the goodness that God desires for each of us.

I think that we probably all want to experience that same satisfaction and goodness, and that means being able to say “yes” to the most important things, even when they come up unexpectedly, like on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, or Marion to Bucyrus. Christ gave us a good bit of guidance when he taught that the greatest commandment is to love God and love our neighbors as we love ourselves; the rest we kind of have to sort out on our own. But I think we all have a pretty good idea of what is truly special in our lives, and what we always want to be able to say “yes” to—whether it’s family or work or friends. We all have special ways that we experience God’s goodness in our lives, and we don’t ever want to have to say “no” to any of those things.

So today, we all need to take a look at our boxes. We need to decide if there are a few things we need to take out. The goal is that our boxes aren't so jammed full, so that we will always have space to deal with the unexpected needs that arise and to which we will always want to say "yes." Because when that all important call comes, the best answer, the life-giving answer is the one that goes like this: "Yes, Lord, here I am, send me."