

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World*

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost/October 1, 2017

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When I was a boy I used to ride the 23 trolley down Germantown Avenue to school. There was a diversity of people on that trolley – black, white, boys my age who spoke with their hands from the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf (that used to be where New Covenant Church is now). What I didn't know was that a black man was responsible for that. Octavius Catto, whose statue was erected this week at City Hall, only lived to be 32 years old. In that time he had a remarkable set of achievements, one of which (140 years ago) was desegregating Philadelphia's trolleys.

One group that I didn't see in that trolley car were native Americans. Pennsylvania is one of only 12 states without an Indian reservation. And it is one of only six where no Indian tribe is recognized by the state or federal government. The tribes were pushed out often violently so that none remain. Nevertheless for me, as a boy on the trolley, the whole world was there, though we mostly kept to ourselves.

I had an eighth grade teacher who once suggested that society would one day find unity through interracial marriage. It is a good teacher that makes a comment that I am still mulling over 55 years later. I think he was right and he was wrong. He was right in that thankfully people of different races marry lovingly with greater acceptance today than when I was a boy. This certainly is a sign of world unity that overcomes estrangement, as we pray in the marriage ceremony. I think my teacher was wrong in that distinct identities with their history, imagery, sometimes language make up an important part of our unity. Our former Assistant Emmanuel would call it a salad bowl.

So if marriage is not the fullest basis for our unity which includes such diversity, what is? Paul argued that it was God's compassion that is poured out

upon all without distinction. He said, “having the same love, (be) in full accord and of one mind.” Everyone in that trolley car had the same love though I only understood it dimly at the time. By what authority does Jesus act with such compassion and forgiveness toward all? That is the question with which the Gospel begins. Such authority is none other than God’s, though like the Pharisees, in our arrogance and judgmentalness we sometimes refuse to see it.

Jesus was congruent. He saw the divine in each person, then followed it up with action. Often, we ( and I certainly include myself) say “Yes, yes, of course,” and then do the opposite. Sometimes we say “yes” because we think we are supposed to. Sometimes we say “yes” because we think it will give us high spiritual marks. Sometimes we say “yes” because we think we are indispensable. Sometimes we say “yes” because we do not want to disappoint our peers. But we don’t follow through, because we are too busy. Or we do not think it will do any good. Jesus’ Pharisees were too self-important. Paul would say they had “selfish ambition.” They had their own agenda. So though they had said “yes,” they went their own way.

Of course there are those who say “no” and then “turn... and live,” as described in the prophecy of Ezekiel. Their “no” arose out of cynicism. God was not fair. It felt like they were being punished collectively for the wrongs of others. We are no strangers to cynicism. Ezekiel prophesied to his people that they would be accountable only for themselves. The novelist Toni Morrison wrote a haiku at our labyrinth that goes “you will be judged by how well you have loved.” That’s what Ezekiel was saying, and the people began to get a new heart and a new spirit. Jeremiah said “no” because he didn’t want to be laughed at (20: 7), but he couldn’t contain God’s moral call. It was like a fire shut up in his bones. He couldn’t hold it in. Isaiah said “no.” He thought he wasn’t worthy. But then in a temple vision an angelic seraph took a burning coal cauterizing his unworthiness, removing his guilt. When the Lord asked, “Whom shall I send?” Isaiah answered, “Send me.” Moses said “no.” He wasn’t very articulate and God wanted him to challenge the mighty Pharaoh. God said, “I will teach you what you are to speak.” Moses still said no again and pleaded with God to send someone else. God gave Moses his brother Aaron to accompany him, and together they went to Pharaoh. Against the

Pharisees who said yes but had their own agenda, Jesus contrasted the tax collectors and prostitutes. They were too impoverished to find any other means of living. Their way of life was a “no” to God’s commandments. But Jesus told them even they were cherished by God. They had the same love as anyone else. It touched their hearts and they turned and found true life.

The Virgin Mary is unusual in that though perplexed, she did not say “no.” When the angel Gabriel informed her that she would have a Son and name him Jesus, she answered, “Here am I... let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). To choose not to shut down, not to be cynical, to open yet further to new possibility takes a tremendous purity of heart. It can only be by God’s grace. Mary was an unknown teenager in a small hamlet. She was far from indispensable and as an unwed mother was likely to be laughed at. But she had the conviction that she was supported, cherished, and guided by God. She said “yes.” It comes down to the first question posed to Jesus. By what authority do we love and forgive? By what authority are we loved and forgiven? The answer can only be by God. The means can only be by God’s grace.

Mary is a model for us. There was no yes and then no, or no and then yes. Her yes was yes. Somehow she knew that God’s embodied compassion lives in all of us, but would most fully live in her. In each of us divine meets divine. We are all cherished by God. We do not need to perform heroic acts like Moses before Pharaoh, or even perhaps like Mary. But we can do the simplest things with great love. When we say yes we enter into the excitement of the world’s give and take. When we say yes we take in the beauty of the trees starting to turn gold. When we say yes we contribute our serenity and praise, our stories and prayers to the world, knowing that what is given in love bears fruit.

So I imagine we are on a kind of world trolley that has been desegregated. Black and white, hearing and non-hearing, native and non-native, no one has been pushed out. Together we hear the screech of the metal wheels, the rocking motion. We are moving. Our destination is love. The driver is love. And each one of us in all of our uniqueness is cherished. We are aware of our smallness, I suppose. There is no first-class or private car in a

trolley ride, or that of a bus. Like Jesus we humble ourselves, and live out a kind of mutual praise. Each one a child of God. This is our stop. Do you want to get on? And we say, and we mean, “yes.”

*Amen.*