

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 6, 2018 – Communion Sunday
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister
John 15:9-17

FOR REFLECTION

“Tough love and brutal truth from strangers are far more valuable than Band-Aids and half-truths from invested friends, who don’t want to see you suffer any more than you have.”

~ Shannon L. Alder, American author

“I mean, most parents would be proud of a kid like that - good-lookin' and smart and everything, but they gave in to him all the time. He kept trying to make someone say 'No' and they never did. They never did. That was what he wanted. For somebody to tell him 'No.' To have somebody lay down the law, set the limits, give him something solid to stand on. That's what we all want, really.”

~ S.E. Hinton, American author

Loving Choices

I wanted to be the coolest parent on the planet – all tie-dye and rock-n-roll. I had all sorts of ideas about how I could create an atmosphere of “yes” and allow my child the freedom to make his own choices and be creative in problem solving. But, many years ago, I heard Oprah Winfrey say, “You have to be the parent your child needs.” That stuck, thank G-d, and I am trying to be just that – however “uncool” and Broadway Musical that might be. My son would not have survived at Summer Hill School [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Summerhill_School] – even though it claimed to be about “freedom not license.” He has needed clear expectations and rules in order to thrive. So, we have provided these without resorting to military school – the other end of the spectrum.

When I married my first husband, our vows were idealistic and binding – as long as we both shall live. When I married John 16 years ago, we promised to wake up each morning and choose to love each other the best we knew how. And if that meant choosing to part ways instead of killing each other, so be it. So far, it hasn’t come to that – and we are excellent life-partners – with an uneven record in showing love – but doing our best each day.

Without even knowing the term, my relationships have been evolving into healthier “Behavioral Covenants.” We explored this idea at our Retreat in April and we will continue to explore this idea in the weeks ahead – as we refine and create healthier ways of being this Beloved Community.

We talk a lot in churches about G-d's unconditional love. But, if we look at our text this morning we might see that there are actually some conditions the G-d has – at least according to the Jesus that John writes about. Note verse 10 and verse 17:

10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love... 17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

The scholars' version translates this as “If you observe my instructions...” This is a big IF. There are conditions here. If we've been paying attention, there are covenants we are supposed to abide by – things like loving G-d and neighbor – things like not coveting what other people have – not committing adultery – not murdering people in body or soul. Israel was told to “shape up” and quit worshipping other gods – or there would be consequences – like invasions from other countries and exile. That's not unconditional love – as far as I can discern. That's tough love – which is also a valuable element of a healthy family or community.

And what I have had to learn as a minister over all these years is that pastoring is not about creating a rarified atmosphere of “yes” and “the parishioner is always right.” I'm well aware (as you know) that your minister is not always right. The same goes for every one of us. And I cannot pastor with unconditional love – especially if any one or two or nine of the rest of us is crossing boundaries and harming the community.

Six months ago, I was reminded by a colleague that I had a responsibility for the health of the congregation that sometimes supersedes my role as unconditional pastor. It is something I DIDN'T learn as an interim – because I could put up with almost anything for two years if I knew I'd be leaving. I have had to learn a different set of boundaries for myself and others as an installed minister with no end in sight. It's much more like being married or a parent with no end in sight – it's a lot more work. And I've been woke.

I am still in the process of integrating the fact that "No." is a complete sentence -- and it's okay to say it whenever [I] need to, without fear or guilt.

No Is a Complete Sentence: Megan LeBoutillier: 9780345376473 ...
<https://www.amazon.com/No-Complete-Sentence-Megan-LeBoutillier/dp/0345376471>

In exploring what deserves a “yes” or “no” answer in my work – I came across Greg McKeown, a leadership and business consultant. He drew me in with these questions:

- **Have you ever found yourself stretched too thin?**
- **Do you sometimes feel overworked and underutilized?**
- **Do you feel motion sickness instead of momentum?**
- **Does your day sometimes get hijacked by someone else's agenda?**
- **Have you ever said “yes” simply to please and then resented it?**

If you answered yes to any of these, the way out is the Way of the Essentialist. ...By applying a more selective criteria for what is essential, the pursuit of less allows us to regain control of our own choices so we can channel our time, energy and effort into making the highest possible contribution toward the goals and activities that matter.

<https://gregmckeown.com/book/>

Forbes Magazine explained the process:

... In his book Essentialism, Greg McKeown suggests ranking your opportunities on a scale from 1 to 100. If the invite or request ranks below a 90, move it to a 0 and politely decline. "If something is just or almost good enough...then the answer should be a no," he writes. This allows you to filter out your watered-down "yeses" so you have a clear purpose behind each decision.

...It's OK to be selfish with your yeses. As McKeown notes, you have to make your peace with the fact that saying no might mean trading popularity for respect. It's unquestionably worth it.

Because if you can't say no, your yes doesn't mean anything.

Regan Walsh, Contributor

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/reganwalsh/2018/02/11/no-is-a-complete-sentence/#3566681e56df>

When we did our workshop at the retreat on determining our leadership styles, I came out clearly as a "collaborator." But I also was a strong "accommodater." Personally and professionally, I have accommodated myself into some serious corners. I'm working on this – with a lot of help – and hope to be a healthier member of my various communities as time goes on.

Sometimes, to abide or rest in G-d's love, we have to take some responsibility for our behavior. Same goes for human relationships and communities. Loving choices are not always the easiest – but they are necessary. May our love of G-d guide us as we pick our way through the minefields of this one, miraculous life we have together.

Scripture Reading for Sunday May 6, 2018 – Easter 6 – Year B

John 15:9-17

9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. **10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.** 11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. 12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you very thing that I have heard from my Father. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. **17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."**

"No." is a Complete Sentence

Perfect fear casts out love. Brueggemann

Walter Brueggemann says in his commentary on Genesis 2:4b-3:24, "Perfect love casts out fear. But the man and the woman in our narrative learned another thing. **Perfect fear casts out love** and leaves only desire (cf. Gen. 3:10: ** 9 But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' 10 He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.')

<https://journeywithgigi.com/tag/walter-brueggemann/>

The Bible says the antidote to fear is the love of God. First John 4:18 reminds us, "Perfect love casts out fear." A corollary is that imperfect love breeds anxiety. If "human love demands human meriting," then each of us is freighted with anxiety.

Perfect Love Casts Out Fear | The Exchange | A Blog by Ed Stetzer
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2017/july/perfect-love-casts-out-fear.html>

Mother of my Soul, Father of my Heart,
Your Name is Love.
May your Passion for Creation
Infuse this World with your loving Purpose.
Feed us with your tender Care,
And Free us from living up to the expectations of others
Just as we Free others from living up to ours.
Guide us toward a life of Compassion
And away from the heart-killing life of selfishness and Contempt.
Yours is the Beloved Community
That thrives in the Light of Your Loving Presence
Throughout Eternity. Amen.

Version: Love by Anne Cohen