

Finding Life in Saying No

Mark 6:7-13

A Summer Preaching Series on
“Living the Life: Grounded in Faith”
A Sermon Preached by Peter Ilgenfritz
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One of the things I am most looking forward to this summer is going on an overnight backpacking trip. Although I have done a good deal of hiking and camping, I have never put my tent, sleeping bag, and food on my back and walked out into the woods to spend the night.

There is a lot I don't know about doing this and so I am delighted that a friend is going with us who knows how to deal with my issues like the lack of bathrooms and the possible presence of bears.

Despite those concerns which could keep me out of the woods this summer, what I know is that getting out in the summer woods reminds me what doesn't matter and what really does.

Last month over a cup of tea, Jan Jacobson asked me the question that is the focus of this Sunday's sermon. She said, “I think I understand most of what we say in our church covenant each week, but what does it mean to ‘reject the false gods of society’?”

Events in the past month have made me think deeply about this question of “false gods” and what it means to find Life in saying “No”.

I have learned over the past month that a false god is whatever we are afraid of that we don't need to be afraid of or whatever we are chasing that is not worth chasing.

Rejecting false gods is at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Jesus called his disciples together to do two things: To be with him, and to join him in doing his work of taking power away from “demons” - those false gods that were trapping lives in fear, anxiety and illness - and freeing up God's healing presence in the world.

That is a big job description. And yet, instead of sending his disciples out with an extensive packing list of what to take, he sends them out with clear list of everything they should not.

Listen for the word of God:

Jesus called the Twelve to him, and sent them out in pairs. He gave them authority and power to deal with the evil opposition. He sent them off with these instructions:

“Don't think you need a lot of extra equipment for this. You are the equipment. No special appeals for funds. Keep it simple.

And no luxury inns. Get a modest place and be content there until you leave.

If you're not welcomed, not listened to, quietly withdraw. Don't make a scene. Shrug your shoulders and be on your way.”

Then they were on the road. They preached with joyful urgency that life can be radically different; right and left they sent the demons packing; they brought wellness to the sick, anointing their bodies, healing their spirits.

(From The Message paraphrase by Eugene Peterson)

In clearing away what doesn't matter, Jesus hopes that his disciples will have room to see what really does.

It's not about taking some extra cash or a change of clothes, the super-saver coupon book for fine restaurants and hotels. It's not even the expectation that people will treat you as well as you know you deserve to be treated. They won't. But no forcing yourself on others. No grudges and self-pity either. You have to leave all that at the door.

Clearly saying no to what you think is essential and even your "right" makes room to hear what really is essential.

Last week, I was away a week-long silent retreat with the Zen Buddhist community I am a member of. I take two or three weeks every year for these times away in silence. I understand all too well the fear of clearing space to listen deeply every time before I go on one of these retreats. I think of all the work I really need to do, that this is really bad timing to be away. I know enough to fear these times for I know everything that comes up when some empty space is made.

After years of doing these retreats, I still don't have a clue what "enlightenment" is. But I am learning that it has something to do with "lightening your load". In clearing away what I thought was "essential" to just sit, breathe and listen is all that is needed to feel what is in the pack of care you are carrying around with you.

To sit attentively, breathe deeply, and listen with care is something we all can do. And yet, to do it, takes great effort. To just sit, breathe deeply and continue to listen to the swirl of everything that comes up. For me: worries and anxieties, fantasies and history, shame and guilt, hurt and confusion, great doubt and the pain in my back. To just face it, feel it, release it.

In the clearing away, what becomes clear is how much stuff is in you. What a lot that doesn't really matter and maybe a little bit clearer about what really does. Beyond what I like and don't like. Beyond my notions of right and wrong.

I know that going away for a week like this means asking for and accepting the support of many people and I know that all the people in my life benefit from my taking this time.

Finally, we don't need to be afraid of silence. We need to reject the "false gods" that keep us from it. For in the clearing away and listening space, we find our ways back to our heart and the very heart of God that has been there all the time.

For the past 11 months, Pedro, an 18 year old Guatemalan seeking political asylum has been living with us. He has taught me a lot about rejecting the false god of thinking that I know what is best for everyone else.

Several months ago, realizing that his 10th grade year was coming to a close at the end of June, we asked Pedro what he wanted to do this summer.

“Nothing”, he said.

“Nothing?”, I respond, wondering if I look as appalled as I feel.

“I like to sleep.”

And so do I – and recommend 8 hour every night....

But with visions of him locked in front of the TV set all summer, we enter the work of planning, (and, at times, sheer imposing of will) to create a summer of Something of Value.

We made it through our first week this past week, a week of two art classes. And much to his surprise and ours he really liked it. With that and Spain making it to the final four of the World Cup, we are off to a good start.

The importance of the work we did with him planning a summer full of summer school and swim lessons, camping and backpacking, summer camp and typing lessons became all the clearer this week when Pedro learned that the application for asylum he had made last November had been rejected. He will appear before a judge in December who will have the final say.

Having Pedro in our family has been a great gift. Truly, one of the greatest gifts in my life. And I know how much Dave and I will miss him if he is deported.

I sat with that grief this past week. Grief for him and the news that he did not want to receive. My own grief. I know how much I do not want him to leave. And I realize that it really is not about me and what I want. I really don't know what is best for Pedro. I don't. I really don't know if the best thing for him is to be here or to return home to his rural village in Guatemala.

As this may be Pedro's last summer in this country, on this July 4th, I think especially of the values that I want him to take with him in his backpack whatever the future holds.

Ask Pedro about the false gods in our country and he will be quick to tell you about policies that lead to people crossing the border from Mexico dying in the desert. Whatever it is that keeps immigrant and refuge families separated from each other.

Nations are notorious for chasing false gods. And sometimes, for saying “no” to them.

What I want for Pedro to learn is not so much that here a country where you can get a lot of stuff for cheap, but that here is a place where he may learn how to make good decisions.

Not so much that here is a country where we learn that “might makes right”, but that here is place which raises up strong women and men who give their lives in service of the common good.

Not so much that here is a place where we measure “success” by abstract notions like grades on report cards, but that here we celebrate what it means to do your best.

That given the complexities of today’s world, that we may look into each other’s eyes and out across the oceans and borders that surround us and make real the poet’s vision,

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free,
The wretched refuge of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

(The sonnet by Emma Lazarus is mounted inside the pedestal
of the Statue of Liberty.)

Amen.