

SAY YES TO GOD

January 1, 2012

I'm going to start out with something in the line of thought for New Year's. This is a time when people make New Year's resolutions, right, and then try to keep them. So the first thing I would really like to talk about is the exciting theme, the exciting topic of obedience. Doesn't that just excite you...thrill you? It's kind of in the line of making New Year's resolutions. How that is suggested to me is several references in the gospel to Mary and Joseph doing what they did in compliance with the law of the Lord...and they and Simeon and Anna being righteous and devout...which suggests and implies to me what maybe is an appropriate New Year's Day theme of obedience.

I think we as Protestant people tend to underemphasize the importance, and really the need of obedience...not a need for our salvation because we know, don't we – and this is why we tend to minimize (if we do) the matter of keeping the commandments let us say – because we know we're saved by grace through faith: faith in a God who is gracious and merciful. We know we cannot keep the commandments perfectly. We know we sin against God. We fall short. We can aim at righteousness. We can aim at obedience. We can aim at doing God's will as we pray the Lord's Prayer. We know we'll fall short. We know we'll miss the mark. We know we sin.

We know, as Paul writes in the third chapter of Romans, that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...that none is righteous...no, not one. Part of that, Paul is himself quoting scripture, Old Testament scripture. And so we depend on...we rely on...we know our only hope is in what happened at Christmas. God sent a savior for us because we need a savior, because we can't accomplish that ourselves. (I'm reminded of this...or this is suggested to my mind...by Mary and Joseph again and Simeon and Anna because they were examples to us, examples for us to follow.) Jesus said, 'you are the light of the world, let your light shine,' and that's what I see with Mary and Joseph and Anna and Simeon – they're examples for us. This is recorded for us for our instruction so that we might aim at righteousness.

Let me ask: How many commandments are there? Obviously, ten. Is there another answer to that? Is there another possibility, another possible answer to that? How many commandments are there? Sue says two. What was the other answer? Twelve. Yeah, actually in terms of laws there are many laws and so we looked at some of those in our reading of the gospel. Why do you say two, Sue? Yeah, Jesus had a couple of conversations in which that kind of thing came out, that the first commandment – the great commandment – is you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, and the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Paul takes things another step. If you could sum up the whole law...if you could sum up all the commandments in one word...what would that word be? Love, yeah...good...all right. Go to the head of the class. Yeah, because Paul reasons that love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

That's the focus for our obedience. As John said: to love both the God whom we have not seen and to love our neighbor whom we have seen. This is the commandment which Christ has given us, that we love one another as he has loved us – and that we be known, that that be the characteristic, that be the trademark, that this be the identification for us – that we love one another as we have been loved. Another reminder of John's writings: that we love because God first loved us. Love is not something we know naturally. Love is something we learn by being loved. And that's why we can venture to be obedient to God, because we have been loved by God and love Him in return.

And because of love by God for us, and because of love for God in response to his love, John could say, and we can say: and His commandments are not burdensome. That just reminds me of two things, and then we'll move on to another thought. When a man is madly in love with his sweetheart, he says to her: Your wish is my command. Whatever it is, honey, just ask. And it's a delight to perform that. And it's not very often that I think of quoting Johnny Cash from the pulpit, but remember that song of his? "*For You, I'll Walk the Line.*" Isn't that what he said? You know maybe better than I. I can hear him singing that: "*For You, I'll Walk the Line.*" Thank you, Judy. Thank you.

We really need to look at the words of Simeon because there would be the Christmas element in the message and in the lessons for us for today. When Simeon was holding in his arms the baby Jesus and said: *Now, I am looking at, now I am seeing with my own eyes, now I am beholding here in my arms what you have said, what you have promised for so long, the redemption of the world, the gift of salvation for all peoples,* Luke gives us that in two places. When the angels appear to the shepherds and say: *I have good news for you of great joy for all people.* And here also Simeon saying: *I am looking at the redemption, this good news for all people – for the Gentiles and for the people of Israel,* that's what we have in the Christmas season, of course. It goes without saying that God has given us the gift of great joy, of good news, of salvation for all people.

I had thought about saying something about the guidance of the Holy Spirit; I'm going to save that for Tuesday. But one thing I want to just say about that – two things – is that has always bothered me...troubled me...that this seems to be such a rarity for us these days: guidance by the Holy Spirit. How was it that Simeon was guided the way he was? Well, maybe make it three things. One of them is after the Christmas Walk, at the Cathedral, there were a few of us still remaining in the dining room...maybe had an eye on the cookie table...one last visit...but it was Sue, and I don't remember the name of the lady from the Divine Temple, and we were chatting and she said: *The Lord said to me, have the Welcome Song sung for all these people.*

There were about 125 to 150 people for the Christmas Walk this year. It was marvelous. The church was full – twice as many as we have here this morning. But this is New Year's, I know, and snow and all that. And she said: *The Lord said to me.* I thought: *Oh, hey, maybe this business of guidance by the Holy Spirit is not so rare.*

The third thing is, see, we're here this morning. How did that happen? What spirit was that that brought us here? And I think, yeah, maybe the guidance of the Holy Spirit is not so rare. May the Holy Spirit who guided you to come here and be here this morning also be the one to guide you to resolve to be obedient to the will of God for love's sake which takes away the burden of it, to be obedient to make it your aim to please Him.

So then the last thing is the thing that has rattled around in my head for a long time, and I know I don't have time enough to say much about it today, but it is the matter of becoming human. It says in Galatians, the reading that Judy shared with us, that in the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son born of woman. Martin Luther, if I may, in his explanation of the second article of the Apostle's Creed said: ***I believe in Jesus Christ through God begotten of the Father for eternity and also through man born of the Virgin Mary.***

But something has gone awry...something has happened...and ours is a humanity that is marred and defaced and, to some extent, lost. And the question is, who are we? And again, if I may, Martin Luther, particularly in reference to baptisms said: ***Werde was du bist!*** You all remember that, I'm sure, don't you. ***Werde was du bist!*** In English, ***become what you are.*** At the font of baptism, we became children of God. Now it's for us...the rest of our life...to become what we are. We are children of God; become children of God. We are human; become human. Become what we are...become what you are...become more like Jesus – and so that would be a reason for obedience, wouldn't it? – so that in our life we might, more and more, be conformed so that the work that God is doing in us will be brought to perfection.

And now I just realized something looking at my notes: I haven't once mentioned the theme printed in the bulletin. I guess I'd better do that. Obedience is a way of saying yes to God, isn't it? And working at becoming human is a way of saying yes to God. May it be our New Year's resolution to say yes to God. And we pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we aim to please You, God; as we aim to do that which is right and pleasing in Your sight so that we might become what we are: Your people...Your children...what You created us to be. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Second Sunday in Christmastide
January 1, 2012