



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Creating Healthy Relational
Boundaries, Pt 4:
Just Say NO!*

selected verses from the Gospels

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Here we are—the fourth Sunday in a sermon series of four. When we do our planning each year, four Sundays seems like a lot of opportunity to explore a topic—yet we end each wanting more, knowing that we’ve barely scratched the surface. And this series has been rich—much to think about and even to apply practically speaking, in our everyday lives.

The first week we took a dive into self-differentiation, noting the need for each of us to be like a cell, with walls/membranes/and boundaries to even exist. And yet cells need to join with other cells in order to fulfill the function for which they were created.

Week number two brought an even deeper dive into self-differentiation, defining and knowing oneself while staying in a relationship with those around us, even and especially those with whom we disagree. It’s about the ways in which we find ourselves responding maturely and not falling into reactionary mode. And it’s as true for a group of people (a congregation) as much as it is for an individual.

Last week we were encouraged to find meaningful community in a world that is becoming increasingly isolated and lonely. A community where we can share our lives appropriately and grow closer to one another and God through our relationships, without violating healthy boundaries.

And so, in thinking about a good direction for this morning’s theme on relationship boundaries, it didn’t take long for me to realize that over the years, a struggle for me has been remembering and knowing how to draw healthy boundaries by just saying NO. By nature, I’m a YES person...and I have a hunch that I’m NOT alone. When it comes to just saying NO, I want to add a disclaimer that I have not yet arrived. I don’t have all of the answers, but I long to explore it more, to learn more, to practice saying no, and to find a freedom in that learning.

When I say YES all too quickly, sometimes...maybe even many times...I take on more than I should or agree all too readily to something that I don’t really want to agree to! In a

2 culture that seems only to understand “yes,” how do we help each other say “no”? It’s not a new phenomenon, it’s part of being humankind...somewhere around the year 400AD, Constantine said “God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them.”

And so we turn to scriptures for guidance. At first I looked at scriptures on the Sabbath. There we find great reminders—even God rests—God said no to working on the seventh day—even God took a break. I thought too about Paul’s writings and his everyday wisdom for living a life of abundance. And then I wondered what Jesus’ life and teachings would have for us. And so I explored the Gospels and here are a few passages that might be instructive to us...

Luke 5:15–16—*...now more than ever, the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.* In order to find time to recharge, Jesus said NO as he withdrew from the crowds who clamored for him. He knew he needed that one-on-one time with God.

In Luke 4, we see Jesus violently rejected by his hometown folks in Nazareth:

Luke 4:28–30—*When they (the crowds) had heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.* If that’s not self-differentiation, I don’t know what is! Jesus kept his focus and walked right through the threatening crowd.

Matthew 11:28–30—*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.* Jesus knew and taught of the importance of self-care.

Matthew 6:6a—*But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray.* Again, making self-care a priority.

Matthew 5:37—*Let your word be Yes, Yes, or No, No; anything more than this comes from the evil one.* Jesus taught to stay focused on who we are and to what God is calling us.

The gospels paint a well-balanced picture of Jesus, a man who ate healthy foods, got the sleep he needed, took time to relax and get-away from the hustle and bustle to restore his soul. Travelling over and around the Palestinian hillsides, he got a lot of exercise as he walked virtually everywhere. No Uber for Jesus.

He had personal needs that he made priority—sometimes even over the needs of others. And he appeared to do so without feeling guilty or apologizing. Jesus lived a life of rhythm that not only kept him free from burn-out, but far beyond that, it filled his spirit, full of God and therefore ready to be compassionate and generous in his response to people, their needs, interruptions and crises when they arose. His relationship with God was his source of energy and focus, drawing clear boundaries, including saying NO.

Now I must confess, and I don't think this will rock your socks—I am a people pleaser. For many of us, it has become an ingrained habit. The more we do it, the more entrenched the habit has become. We can be on autopilot, agreeing to do things, to say YES, before we even realize it. In a sense, we've wired our brains to respond in that way, whenever people ask things of us. As a little girl growing up in the 50's and 60's, my highest aspiration was to be a "nice" girl. As a child, saying "yes" was the nice thing to do and often resulted in approval of authority figures. And we learned that by saying yes, we could make other people happy. Conversely, we learned vicariously that saying "no" could be construed as impolite or inappropriate.

For the most part, saying YES comes from a good place. We want to be helpful to others. Several years ago, when we were first married with a baby or two, a friend of mine was just starting out on his own, he had landed his first job after completing school, and needed a car. But he didn't have any

4 credit rating yet. So he asked me if I would co-sign a loan to purchase a modest vehicle. I knew this car was very important to him and he didn't have a lot of other support to help him with it. And I could tell he really wanted me, needed me (I thought), to say Yes—I could see it in his eyes and read it on his face. And I wanted more than anything to say “yes.” I would want someone else to do the same for me. After talking with Dave about it, we decided that I couldn't say Yes because we, too, were just starting out and would not have been able to take on his debt if that need arose. All these years later, I still remember how really difficult it was for me to say NO. But it was the right thing to do.

There are lots of reasons that we say “yes” when NO may be the better answer:

- We want to avoid disappointing people, like my friend. Had I said yes, it surely would have stressed me and there's a good chance that I would have resented signing for the loan.
- We want to avoid seeming selfish
- We want others to like us and we don't want to offend anyone
- Many of us are averse to conflict
- And we fear missing out on opportunities FOMO = fear of missing out

I think this last one is the most difficult for me. There are many good things that come our way, invitations and activities and adventures. I can't resist the opportunity for a new adventure. And, of course, who knows if this opportunity will ever present itself again, right?

Some research has suggested that social media only reinforces this tendency. When we're constantly looking at Facebook and watching others post about their experiences, we might be more inclined to say yes to something because we don't

want to feel left out or un-adventuresome—that FOMO—fear of missing out.

The problem isn't that we say yes to opportunities. The problem is that oftentimes we fail to discern carefully between good opportunities and great ones. And we stretch ourselves too thin, by saying Yes. There's only so much time in a day and we can't do everything. That means that each time we say yes to something, we tacitly say no to something else. By declining some offers, we allow ourselves the freedom to say yes to those that might come along and be a better fit. According to business magnate and philanthropist Warren Buffett, "The difference between successful people and very successful people is that very successful people say 'no' to almost everything."

So how do we say no in healthy ways? How can we break that ingrained behavior of being a people pleaser? I have a book that gives a number of examples of how to just say NO. Among the many chapters is "How to say no to your spouse." So I thought I'd use that as an example this morning, and share how I might say no to Dave, even though this is way out of character! 😊

Here's the scenario: suppose you dislike loud, raucous concerts. It hurts your ears, it's hot and crowded and stuffy and smoky and you're concerned about your safety in rowdy crowds. Let's say your spouse, in this case Dave, asks you to accompany him to a heavy metal concert. Here's how, according to the book, you might answer: "Thanks for asking me, Dave. But I'd rather not go. I don't enjoy those types of concerts. If you'd like to invite a friend to go, please do and we can have a date night another time." Be direct, clear and straightforward. It's OK to cushion it with kindness or a compliment—it lets the other person, in this case your spouse, know that you care. (How do you feel about that, Dave? We can debrief at lunch!)

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Here are a couple of other examples from the book:

Perhaps in response to an invitation to accept an extra project at work, which is more that you want to take on, you might say:

- *This sounds like a great opportunity but I'll have to pass. Thank you for considering me.*

Or in response to an invite from a friend:

- *A trip to Timbuktu sounds fun, thanks! Unfortunately, I won't have the time to swing it this summer.*

If you are not interested in leaving the door open for another time, be clearer with something like, *"I'm not interested in visiting Timbuktu but I thank you for thinking of me!"*

- Resist the urge to offer excuses and don't stall for time—don't say I'll think about it if you already know you don't want to do it.
- Describe your lack of bandwidth—*I don't have enough time to help you move today.*
- And for FOMO—fear of missing out—experts say—take a moment to think it over—is it really something worth committing to?

Life is too short to spend energy on choices that don't engage our heart or mind. By saying NO to those opportunities, we just might be saying YES to ourselves, and that's a beautiful thing.

Our family's lives changed in a day, just two months ago in September, with my breast cancer diagnosis. All of a sudden, the same things didn't matter anymore. Spontaneously our family said no to the other demands of our lives...and came home that first weekend to be together—to gather around the dining room table and to eat together. Because we needed one another. Relationships matter—spending time together matters. And I realize all too keenly, that carving out that time to be together means saying no to other things, even for

a recovering people pleaser like myself. I want to Just Say NO to distractions that sap time and energy and I want to say YES to life. And you can hold me accountable, and I will hold you accountable. I think that's the beauty of a vibrant and loving faith community. We share our lives together, support one another, remind one another it's OK to Just Say NO.

We are coming to a time of anointing this morning. If you're not familiar with anointing—it's applying olive oil to one's forehead with a blessing—**God to hold you, Christ to free you**, symbolizing an openness to whatever peace and blessings God might have for you.

- Maybe you yearn to be free to Just Say NO more often.
- Or maybe you, too, are a people pleaser and you want to break that habit.
- Perhaps you are a caregiver, but struggle with caring for self.
- Maybe this Thanksgiving you, like me, are overwhelmed with gratitude and want to express your thankfulness to a generous and loving God.
- Whatever the reason, come forward as you feel led and receive the fulness of God's blessings.

God to hold you, Christ to free you.

