

**"It's okay to say No."
(Luke 13:1-9)
March 20, 2022**

"There were some present who told (Jesus) about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." Pilate was a Roman prefect appointed to perform his military duties in Judaea. In reality, he extended his duties beyond military matters. He was well-known for using excessive forces to achieve what he wanted. He even seized the temple treasury for a waterworks project and killed many who resisted him. So, it was not surprising to hear that he killed some Galileans during their worship, which made their blood mingle with their sacrifices. He could give any reason to justify it. But why did the people bring this incident to the attention of Jesus? Was it just a reminder to keep Jesus informed that some Galileans died awfully? Galileans. Jesus was one. Do you remember Nathanael had expressed a strong negative feeling about Nazareth, a city in lower Galilee? He said, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (John 1:46) Judas of Galilee was just another example. He was a Jewish leader who led resistance to the census imposed for Roman tax purposes by Quirinius around 6 AD. (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:1). Galileans were not some ordinary Joe Blows. They were troublemakers and sinners who rocked the boat. Jesus knew that, of course. But instead of challenging this prejudice, he asked, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" He wanted the people to see this incident from another perspective. Must a tragedy be interpreted as a judgment of God, so that they could save their compassion? Unwanted events and disasters happen all the time. They happened to the Galileans and to the Jerusalemites, "those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them." To both disasters, Jesus disagreed with their association of the disasters with sin and offense. "No," Jesus said, "unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." They must abandon their wrong presupposition. Otherwise, the logic they followed would only lead to an understanding of their lives as doomed.

Are you still following the war development between Russia and Ukraine? It's absurd. Not all Russian soldiers think like Putin. Many of them, including some who died, didn't even know why they entered the territory of another country. They died and suffered, not because of their sin or offense,

but others. By the same token, nobody should say the Ukrainian civilians and soldiers were killed due to their sin or transgression.

The association of tragedies, morality, and God's judgment, however, happens all the time. In the bible, we found it in the cessation of building the tower of Babel, Noah's flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the plagues of Egypt, and the evil that came upon the oppressors of Israel. In human history, we found it in the outbreak of the Black Death, measles brought by Columbus to the New World, HIV, SARS, COVID-19, and natural disasters like earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, and hurricanes.

We are living in the Twenty-first Century. We might think that our knowledge would help us dissociate the unnecessary connection between tragedies, morality, and God's judgment. Unfortunately, that's not always the case. We have created more barriers than we can imagine that prohibit it from happening. We delegate too much of our power to the government that sets rules affecting our ways of living. We entrust too much of our decisions to religions that influence or dictate our ethics and spiritual well-being.

When our government wants a balanced budget, we tend to agree with it and say yes. But what about those who suffer due to the changes in funding? Some can only blame themselves for not having enough savings, while some even have to bear the stigma of being lazy and underperforming. Are there alternatives? When the government says no, we are forced to accept it. However, look at what the government did during the pandemic? We start to realize that a balanced budget as promoted was not the only option. There are better ones. It's only the beginning for us to appreciate the value of a livable basic income. We might see more if we learn to say "No" like Jesus. So, is it okay to say "No"? Yes! A big Yes. It's okay to say no.

In Jesus' parable, there was a fig tree on the vineyard owner's property, which was very common in Palestine. The owner must have high expectations to harvest from that tree since he came looking for fruit on it for the past three years. I wonder if he knew it usually takes three years before a fig tree would bear fruits. Besides, every tree is different. That one might take longer. But when the boss ordered to cut it down, what else can the gardener say to him? To say "No"? No. But Yes. That's what the gardener said, just in a nice way. "Sir, let it alone for one more year until I dig around it and put manure on it." So the gardener didn't just prolong the tree's life in the vineyard for one more year but proposed to provide sufficient nourishment for its growth. The tree got its second chance due to the gardener's "No," and the owner of the

vineyard might finally benefit from it. Do you think the apostles who followed Jesus for three years understood Jesus better and became more faithful? They didn't. And Judas was the one who exposed that doubt in him openly. Did they get their second chance? Yes, they did, except Judas. They all got their second chance to re-examine Jesus' words and deeds. What about us? We are going through the same exercise as the apostles. So, don't just follow the flow. Say "No" and commit to different alternatives that would help the neglected, ignored, and the vulnerable in politics, ethics, and spirituality.

I don't want to add another story for this week, but repeating the one I sent last Wednesday, together with the scripture reading from Proverbs "To watch over mouth and tongue is to keep out of trouble.":

If I were feeling sarcastic and glib, I would just say "yup" to the aforementioned passage and move along. But, I'll say more, if you'll let me. I am racialized. I've learned, the hard way, that it's better to keep quiet... It's unfortunate that dominant culture has reinforced this lesson with its constant refrain of "Do you have to be so angry all the time?" After all, a maker of trouble—even good trouble— is a maker of trouble nonetheless, and who wants trouble of any kind?

Troublemaking is tiring, exhausting even... Having to point out time and time again where policies are skewed in favour of privilege... where procedures exclude those who are physically challenged... where privileges are protected behind white picket fences and snarling dogs on the painted porches. Sheesh! There is only so much energy a person has in their body, and there are times when I feel like I'm wasting mine.

Yup, it is better for me to keep quiet... to keep my words to myself, to shut down my thoughts and disengage from the echo chamber of self-serving conformity. Silence is the tool of oppression, and hey, I can admit when I'm oppressed... I know when I've been beaten and beaten down, beaten into submission, choke-held and suffocating because my cries for my life, my cultures, my thoughts are emotionally inconvenient to dominant culture. Wherever and whatever dominant culture may be.

Yes, yes. I will watch my mouth. Yes, I will keep out of trouble. I will stay behind the wall dominant culture has built for me. What choice do I have?

Kindly say “No” to this “Yes, yes.” Name what we need, and don’t just let others to decide for us. The Church and its local communities of faith might have different mission and vision statements, but they all respond to the same call from God, i.e., to be disciples and to make disciples in the name of God. (Matt 28:19-20) We are the voices with particular messages that are not the concerns of the government, the court, or any institutions, secular or religious. Kindly say “No.” It’s okay to say no for the benefits of others. Amen.