

Sunday, July 3, 2011  
Lectionary 14  
Proper 9  
Third Sunday after Pentecost

Zechariah 9:9–12  
Psalm 145:8–14  
Romans 7:15–25a  
Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30  
Year A

I.N.I.

Ernie Tavela is God's gift to the church. He wouldn't think so, but it's true. Ernie is salt of the earth, he is an avid Red Sox fan, he hails from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and he has fixed more things in the church than any other man, woman, or child combined. I would ask him a question about the thermostat, and Ernie would launch into a lecture on programming, the set point, the zones, and the laws of physics. My eyes would start to glaze over as soon as he would even mention words like intake, heat exchange, and sensors.

Ernie is a licensed as a commercial HVAC/plumber. One of his big claims to fame is that he worked on the plant in Londonderry, New Hampshire that makes Stonyfield Farm Yogurt. But especially in his retirement he would happily come to Christ the King, when my former parish was in crisis, like when a pipe would burst, like when out of all the preschool classrooms one would be freezing, or even when a light went out. I can't tell you how much better I felt when I would see Ernie pulling into the parking lot in his pick-up truck loaded with tools of the trade.

Ernie is no crackerjack theologian. But he is a disciple, true and true. When Barbara, a neighbor of Ernie's and pastor's widow did not answer phone calls from her daughter in Boston, her daughter contacted Ernie to check up on her. And Ernie, God's gift to the church, of course said yes.

In these weeks of summer, we will ponder a bit what it means to jump into discipleship under Jesus, teacher and leader. Think about invitations that been extended to you recently or over the years. Think about your family, your work, your time, your pastimes, and your connection to Christ. Where have there been burdens? Where have choices that you made led to wonderful adventures? To what have you said your yeses, and to what you no's?

In an essay on Christian Practices, M. Shawn Copeland writes thoughtfully about all our yeses and no's. And she offers these words that are spot on, I think:

*Learning when and how, to what, and to whom to give our yes or our no is a lifelong project. It is learning to live not merely in dull balance or tedious moderation but in passionate, disciplined choice and action. It is learning to find support and challenge, courage and correction, as we live out our choices. Sustaining and realizing our yes from day to day is only possible when negative behaviors are supplanted by positive and generative ones, when we redeem the routines of our daily lives, when we choose and carry out commitments that give and support life.*

–“Saying Yes and Saying No,” in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, edited by Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, © 1997), pp 67-68.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is confounded about the public reception to his teaching, to his behavior, and to his and his disciples’ shared mission. He laments that people who should “get it” don’t, while those we might expect “not to get it” do. This was his analogy: If children played a game with a flutist playing, then they might dance to the wedding game’s song or cry to the funeral game’s song. But they don’t play either game!

John and Baptist and Jesus were contrasting figures both committed to paving the way for God to break open a new way of being present to the world. John was an ascetic calling people to austerity in the desert. Jesus was a social butterfly, a party animal who eats with tax collectors, and associates with prostitutes. Criticism was leveled at both John and Jesus. The naysayers didn’t join the dance either with John or Jesus.

Paul, St. Paul, is a hesitant dance partner. As soon as he gets ready to say yes toward a life in the Spirit, he gets pulled toward something altogether unhealthy. As much as he is attracted toward this way toward God, he is easily distracted toward actions that destroy this dance of faith.

It’s like New Year’s resolutions that are forgotten by January 2. It’s like the best intentions, which are said to pave the road to hell. It’s like a mounting debt, an aging building, life’s plans and hopes that fall by the wayside.

Listen again to the invitation, offered by Jesus, the teacher, the one with connections to God, the one who affirms Gospel access to the little ones, the one who leads the dance. This is from a Bible paraphrase called *The Message*

*Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.* —from *The Message*

There is a practice that I learned last Fall when church burdens weigh heavy on you, and when life is all weariness. Pretend your body is hunched over, you arms are holding a hundred pound wait. Here’s what it looks like [lift body and arms, and release!]

This is what Christ has to offer. It doesn’t mean that discipleship is a walk in the park. It does mean that with Christ, all things are possible. It doesn’t mean that there will be no demands. It does mean that with Christ, what seems like daunting work is doable. It doesn’t mean that problems, sin, or anxiety will be swept under the rug. It does mean that taking on Christ’s cross, giving your burdens over to God, gives our uncertainty and fears a new framework.

It’s like in place of a battleship you use a tractor. It’s like in place of a warhorse you ride a donkey. It’s like instead of going it alone, you have all sorts of company. It’s like when you walk with others who are along for the journey of faith, it feels like dancing.

It's like when the furnace stops working and instead of panicking, I call Ernie Tavela, who when invited to the dance, says yes!

Or as Paul, poor Paul, poor stymied Paul says, "Thanks be to God through Christ Jesus our Lord!  
[lift body and arms, and release!]

I.N.I.