Pentecost 6 Proper 9

July 4, 2021

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

It’s often said that God has 3 answers for our prayers: Yes, no, and silence.

‘Yes’ seems like the best answer, because we wouldn’t ask for something that isn’t good, right? But sometimes ‘yes’ comes with a new opportunity or challenge that we might not feel up to being able to do.

Silence is hard, because we have no way of knowing what it means. Is God telling us to be patient? Is God telling us to ask for something different? Is God telling us to solve the problem on our own? Is God simply sitting with us in silence as we mourn or contemplate or struggle with our choice? Or is it that we’re not listening properly, and can’t hear whatever it is that God is telling us?

As challenging as ‘yes’ and silence can be, perhaps ‘no’ is the hardest for us to accept. It’s difficult to feel like God is saying ‘no’ when we ask for something in prayer, because we don’t usually feel like we’re asking for things that aren’t good.

Paul heard a ‘no’ from God, not just once but three times. But from his example, we can learn how to stay strong in our faith, whatever the answer we get from God.

Over the centuries, there’s been much speculation as to the nature of the thorn in the flesh that Paul speaks of in our Epistle reading today. But, truthfully, nobody knows what it was, and wondering about it keeps us from Paul’s point in this passage.

Paul prayed for his mysterious thorn to be removed, but God says no, and assures Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” Which doesn’t exactly seem logical. I like the way it’s worded in *The Message*: “My grace is enough; it’s all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.”

God asked Paul for trust. To trust that God knew what was best for him. And while that mysterious thorn was troubling for him, our reading today suggests that perhaps it also served to keep Paul humble.

Like Paul, we’re asked to trust that God knows best. We’re asked to remember that when God says no, it’s not because God wants to see us suffer. It’s not because God doesn’t love us, or that God doesn’t want us to be happy.

Think about it this way:

When you have a child, do you give them everything they ask for? No. They have to learn that sometimes you have to earn special things. They have to learn that you don’t get everything you want. That resources are limited, but also, getting everything you want isn’t actually a good thing.

And if it hurt you when you were raising your children and had to say ‘no’ when they wanted something, but you knew that you couldn’t afford it, or they didn’t really need it, or they needed to learn responsibility or some other not all that fun life lesson instead…if that hurt you, imagine how it hurts God when God says ‘no, I’m not going to take away this trouble you have. I know it hurts. But remember that my grace is sufficient for your needs.’

Sometimes God says ‘no.’ That doesn’t mean God is inflicting us with punishment for our sins. It doesn’t mean that God doesn’t love us. It doesn’t mean God is acting out of spite or vengeance.

It means that God sees the big picture, understands the plan God has for creation. And sometimes that means that we’re asked to accept whatever the thorn in our own flesh is, allow it to keep us humble, and remember that we can serve God despite it.

But sometimes, it means we’re asking for the wrong thing, and we need to reevaluate our priorities. Jesus tells us to be persistent in our prayers, not because there’s a magic number of times we ask for something before God grants it, but because we’re only going to keep on praying for things that are really important to us.

Prayer isn’t about convincing God to give us what we want, but about learning to be in a deeper relationship with our Creator.

Sometimes — perhaps more often than we’d like — God’s no or God’s silence are invitations. We pray for a lot of things to be better, situations to be changed. We know that God could end world hunger, illness, strife. God could bring about world peace. God could undo all the things that are bad in the world.

Sometimes, when God says ‘no,’ it’s an invitation for us to do something about the situation. For us to change our hearts. For us to put ourselves in the shoes of others and learn to understand what their lives are like, rather than judge them based on our own limited understanding of their story. For us to find creative ways to act and be brave in the face of forces that work to uphold an unjust status quo.

Sometimes…God says ‘no’ as a way of inviting us into a deeper relationship with Him, asking us to trust more, to bend our will to His, rather than seek to bend God’s will to our own. God sometimes answers our prayers not by changing the circumstances, but by changing our hearts.

No matter the answer God gives us, we need to always remember that God’s grace is sufficient for us – that God’s love and wisdom and mercy are unending.

May we find the comfort that is in that promise and in the promise that we are never alone, no matter what life brings our way.