

"Saying 'Yes' to God" – A Dialogue Sermon June 7, 2018

God entered the lives of a little boy named Samuel, and a teenage girl named Mary, in amazing ways. Each said “yes” to God. The mission of First UMC Baraboo is ‘Helping People ‘Say Yes” to God. In today’s message Lay Leader Mike Pullen and Pastor Marianne Cotter ask: what did ‘saying yes to God’ mean in the past for the people of First UMC Baraboo? What does it mean for us today?

MP: Pastor Marianne, Baraboo FUMC has a great mission statement: “Helping people ‘say yes’ to God.”

PM: Saying “yes” does release positivity. How about if we tell these people what “helping people ‘say yes’ to God means for each of us?

MP: Sure! Good idea.

PM: You go first!

MP: OK! There have been several times in my life that I’ve sensed God’s acute “nudges” and responded with “Yes, Lord”. The most significant times, those nudges pushed me from a state of “humble spiritual smugness” (when I’m feeling good about my relationship with God) to places that-- weren’t comfortable, doing things that I didn’t perceive as “coming naturally”: I was edged toward ways that weren’t *obvious*, toward choices that were risky or unconventional or “out of norm”.

How about you, Pastor Marianne?

PM: Saying yes to God in Jesus Christ came on a spring day in 1983, at Marsh chapel at Boston University School of Theology. It was my first Communion sermon. The invitation to come forward to take communion was given, and I said yes. When I received the bread and the cup in Jesus’ name my life changed. I suddenly knew that God loved the whole world and also that God loved me. I realized Christ died for the whole world and also for me. Afterwards I felt a peace I’d never felt before. My baptism a year and a half later was another time I said “yes” to God. Every day, when I sit down to pray or read the Bible, that’s another ‘yes.’

MP: That’s wonderful!

Today we heard two stories about a hero and a heroine of the faith saying ‘yes’ to God.

PM: Mike, when you think about the story of the little boy Samuel ‘saying yes” to God what do you hear?

MP: Samuel was “practicing” saying “Yes” by “ministering to the Lord” with Eli. Samuel heard God’s voice, and after some confusion-- responded to God. His willing response allowed God to working through Samuel to lead God’s people further toward authentic holiness-- not just “practicing”. I also notice that-- Samuel didn’t exactly know what God was asking of him when he responded: Samuel’s response was *willingness*. I also note: things *changed* for Samuel, and for Israel, and for the world, when Samuel said “Yes” to God.

PM: It’s mostly Samuel’s willingness that stands out for you then, right?

MP: Yep, that’s what resonates with me. We also heard Mary’s story of saying ‘yes’ to becoming the mother of the son of God. What do you hear in that story Pastor Marianne?

PM: I noticed first that Mary questioned. When Gabriel says Mary you are blessed/favored by God; you’ve been chosen to become the mother of the Son of the Most High God: she asks a question, “how can this be since I am a virgin?” The next thing I notice is that Mary had a choice.

MP: Hmm-- so Mary could have said “No” to God...

PM: Exactly. God’s plan all along was to have Jesus come into the world, so that God would come among us, in the flesh in Jesus. For that to happen, God needed a mother. God needed Mary’s cooperation. God’s plan couldn’t have been accomplished without Mary’s “yes”. If Mary is a role model for all Christian believers – as traditions says she is – then we need to follow her example. We need to take a risk- give our whole selves -- and cooperate fully with God.

MP: I’m with you Pastor Marianne. But what does this mean practically?

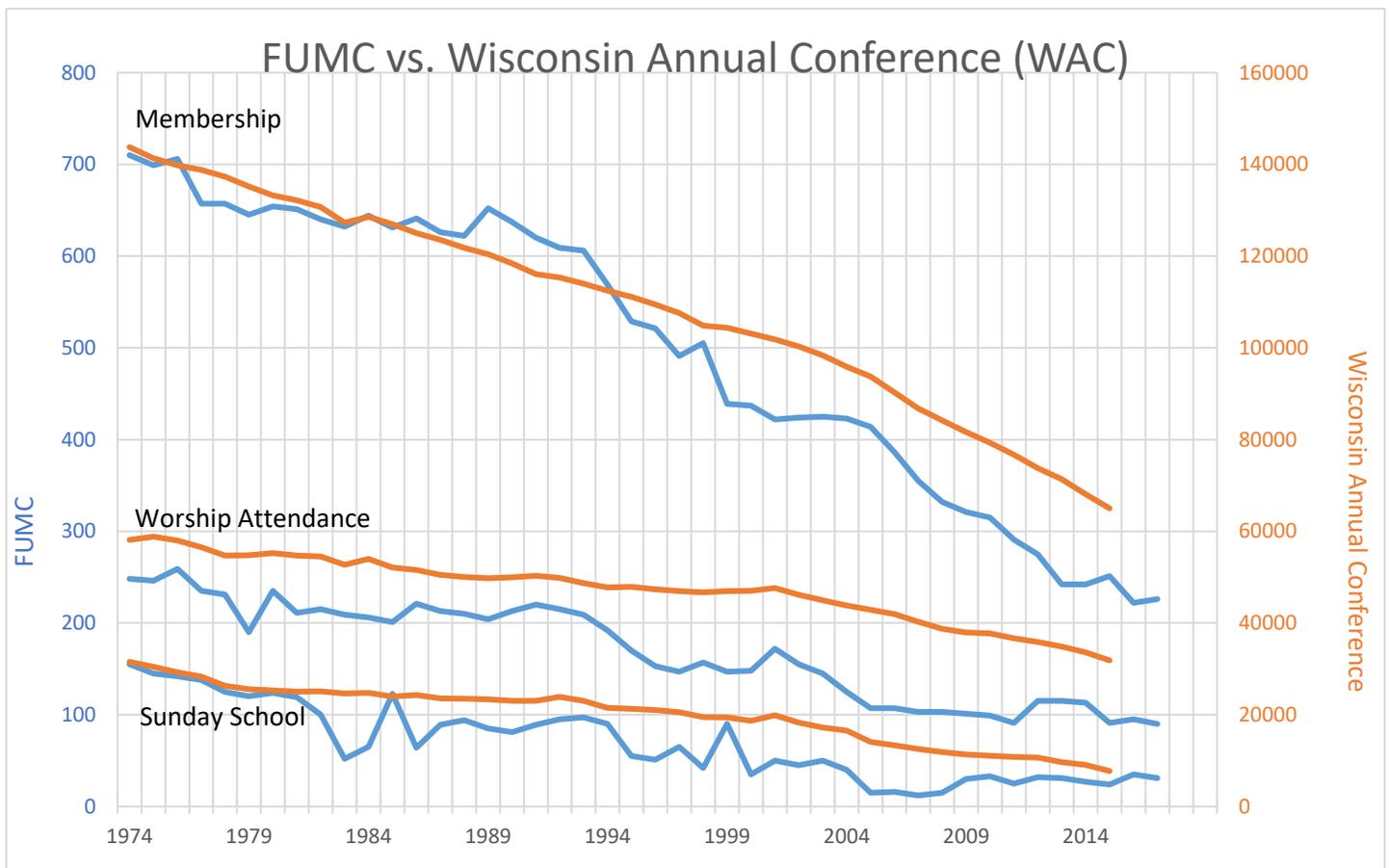
PM: John Wesley said Christianity is active not passive. God’s love and grace are offered freely to everyone but we need to respond. We need to ‘say yes’: say “I’m going to trust you God” ... “I believe you are my savior Jesus” “I need you God; I can’t do this alone.” At that moment made right with God: we are justified. That is the start of a wonderful, life-long transformation where God leads us away from sin, away from a focus on the self to a life filled with love for God and neighbor. For that transformation to happen, we need to keep on ‘saying yes to God’ every day. And so we use the ‘means of grace.’ The ‘means of grace’ are daily prayer, Bible reading, fasting, talking with other Christians, works of mercy, works of justice, Holy

Communion, weekly worship. This is how, in practice, we become like Mary: these things help us get closer to God.

MP: United Methodist Theology 101! Let's shift our focus now. It's time to talk about the numbers.

PM: I don't like to talk about the numbers.

MP: I don't necessarily either. But they may help us see what it means to say 'yes to God' right now. You have an insert in your bulletin with some graphs. The blue lines present average annual membership and attendance at Baraboo UMC over the last couple of generations; the orange lines represent the same data for the WI Annual Conference of the UMC as a whole. The top lines are "membership"; the middle lines are "worship attendance" and the lower represent "Sunday school attendance". Pretty drastic decline over the last couple of generations, huh-- our membership has dropped from around 800 to around 200; our worship attendance has dropped to around 100. Note that our congregation's "data trend" is quite similar to the trend in our annual conference. Pastor Marianne, what do you see in these numbers?



PM: I see three things: first I feel like I'm back in junior high and I as pastor/we as a church just got a bad report card. And now my parents are looking at it. I feel judged and like I'm not good enough. Yuck!

MP: Not a good feeling. No.

PM: I'm sad, and a little frustrated, too, when I see the numbers for our congregation. We're doing good ministry as a church. We've got good programs. Yet many more people could be served. The second thing I see is: our numbers mean we're similar to our friends in the global church at this moment in history. Fewer than 20% of Americans regularly attend church. Average worship attendance for those who are involved in a church is now less than two times a month. Christianity is no longer the default faith in Europe. Church attendance among adults 16 - 29 in Europe is down sharply. The third thing I see is: God's giving us a wake-up call too. If my doctor showed me similar downward trends in my good cholesterol levels or iron levels – I'd pay attention and take action to change things. What do you see here Mike?

MP: Our trends, unfortunately, reflect those in other mainline denominations (and increasingly, evangelical denominations). Naturally, these declines are concerning. But, I don't see failure per se: there is "no shame, no blame" in these numbers. However, these trends should enlighten and inform and inspire us. From where we are now, failure would if we did not adjust our actions based on these numbers. We are not doing anything wrong as a congregation, per se. We are doing so much right actually – in our intergenerational programs, our Christian Education, our multi-sensory worship, our Neighborly Free Store and Christmas dinner and so much more. We doing things that 40 years ago would have continued to grow the church but, now, are not. But of course the numbers don't give the whole picture.

PM: Right, these numbers don't show all the ways this faith community has been a source of blessing and hope in the past 175+ years. It doesn't show all the lives changed, all the beautiful music, the mission work, the generous giving, and weekly inspiration and hope offered in worship. These numbers don't show the great ministry the Wisconsin Annual Conference has done to include women and ethnic minorities in pastoral leadership, the number of Hispanic ministries in Wisconsin, or the great ministries like walk to Emmaus, The Upper Room Devotional, summer camp, Two Year Academy for Spiritual Formation, VIM mission trips, UMW School for Christian Mission, vacation Bible schools and so much more.

MP: An interesting, hopeful, fact that is that, while our membership and attendance numbers have certainly declined, the distance between the top line and the middle line has shrunk. As a percentage of membership, worship and Sunday school attendance are higher... we might call this our "involvement index"-- and it's is now significantly higher than a couple of generations ago:

We as a congregation don't really bear the burden of measuring success or failure in terms of numbers presented here. I like to say, "Jesus never called us to count the sheep-- He charged us to feed the sheep." God asks of us that we stay faithful. But, changes in the culture mean we need to change how we do church.

About now people may be wondering "what's the pastor, what's the Administrative Council, what are we going to do about all this?"

PM: If that's what they are thinking that, Hallelujah! Our goal was to have frank discussion and help people to consider that we can't keep doing what we've been doing all these years and expect to get different results.

MP: So, what do you think saying "yes" to God means for our congregation today?

PM: First it means 'saying yes' every day using "the means of grace" as often as possible. And Saying yes means taking a risk and trying new things. As pastor it means spending more time in the community; and learning more about the people we have yet to welcome into our church. I want to know more about their hurts and hopes, their fears and dream. And 'saying yes' today means learning new ways of reaching out and being the church in the world as it is today. What about you Mike?

MP: In light of these trends, 'saying yes to God' today, as a congregation means-- being willing to consider doing "church" differently than we've done in the past. For example, the Ad Council has commissioned the Design Team to analyze, vision and to propose some experiments. Ad Council has also approved moneys for education opportunities for PMA and for some lay folks to get ideas! The Design Team has also worked on a "Value proposition" exercise: to Put into words what is it we offer the community; that would be lost if we weren't here. In your bulletin is an insert containing a draft Value Proposition and some questions. We invite you to take a few minutes while the Band plays after the sermon, to share your thoughts. You can slip that into the offering plate or just get it to us after worship! We'll be in the fellowship hall after worship for a "talk back" if you'd like to go in to more depth about these numbers, or

have other ideas. Pastor Marianne, we've run out of time. Do you have a final thought to share?

PM: Every United Methodist Church that is being faithful is asking the questions we've been asking today: how can we reinvent/reform/retool ourselves to be the church in the world as it is today (and stop acting like it's still the 1980's)? I'd want to leave people with this word of encouragement. This is a great church. As I look out today I see Mary in these faces. I see people who are good at asking questions, like Mary was. I see people who can take risks, take a leap of faith like Mary did. I'd say: don't think you have to have it all figured out ahead of time. Mary did. Just keep releasing more positivity; keep on saying yes to God and then the Holy Spirit can and will do even more amazing things. What's your final word Mike?

MP: We are at a "Samuel moment" -- maybe sitting here with our heads cocked, saying "huh?," but - we can be willing to say "Yes" as God is acutely nudging us onward and upward-- even when we don't know exactly where God is leading.

PM: Amen!

MP: And Amen!