

26th Sunday of Ordinary Time – Cycle A (September 25, 2011)

So many times we say "no" only to really mean "yes" underneath our initial refusal. St. Peter said "no" three times before finally saying the "yes" he really meant; he was unable to say "yes" because he was afraid and lacked courage.

Thomas Merton was a famous Trappist monk who lived in the twentieth century. His story is one of many "no's" — he was a communist who disdained religion and God; he lived a rather self-centered lifestyle; he over-indulged in many of life's pleasures. But in one powerful instance, his many "no's" were transformed into a "yes" to God.

After walking into a church, Merton says he was "...overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the mystery and corruption of my own soul. I was filled with horror at what I saw and my soul desired to escape." God flooded his soul with Grace, which opened his mind and heart to Love, a Love that freed him from seeing himself as "corrupt" to experiencing this great Love that he said "no" to for much of his life.

The parable in today's gospel makes it clear the God that Jesus reveals is one who is waiting for us to say "yes" to his Love and his Truth. Once we say "yes" and actually live out the consequences of the "yes," we are freed from all constraints of the "no's," only to have our souls breathe meaning and life. Our God is a God of the never-ending second chance: we always can say "yes" even after many falls and failures. Jesus wants our "yes" in word to be matched in our action: words and actions must come together. The one son said his "yes" but really meant "no." The religious leaders who confronted and challenged Jesus were being told in no uncertain way that they were being hypocrites: their words and actions did not come together.

Jesus adds insult to injury when he reminds those same religious leaders that prostitutes and tax collectors (some of the lowest members of society) will enter the Kingdom before they will. They really believed it was enough just to believe in the laws, say the prayers, go to worship, wear the right clothing and they would be guaranteed salvation. "Not so fast," says the Lord. Underneath their very public "yes" was a "no" to the demands of conversion. The parable in the gospel is urging each one of us to look into our hearts and ask the following: Is my "yes" to Christ in my religious observance also evident in my actions? Is my relationship with Christ growing and deepening so that I can acknowledge where my actions are inconsistent with the gospel? Do I look down on anyone our society deems as unacceptable?

Christ emptied himself of the need to live his humanity through the force and power of his divinity. He became a servant and gave his life for us on the cross. When we say "yes" to Christ and his gospel, he wants no less from us: to take our place with those on the edge...to become servants to humanity, living the way of self-denial and the acceptance of our personal cross. Christ wants each one of us to say "yes" only if we really mean it by changing the way we live.

But the God Jesus revealed is the God who is still there within our many "no's" and hypocrisy, waiting for us, like Thomas Merton, to see the darkness only to let his Grace flood our hearts, allowing our souls to soar.