

- Maybe we could teach each other to say “yes” to important things and “no” to little things by deciding together what is big and what is little?
- Maybe we could all say “no” to some of the things we are doing that are less important than church so that everyone here would have one or two jobs and we would relieve the people who dread their five jobs at the church?
- Maybe we could make a list of the things we might quit doing because we can’t remember why we were doing them?
- Maybe we could make a list of things we have never done, that no church has ever done, that might be worth doing – and we would vow to stop doing them when we saw that they were not worth doing?
- Maybe we could set a goal of building an environment of playing with new ideas and experimenting with worship and finding novel patterns of teaching each other how to be better followers now and for the future?

Put those questions of our present into a Church Information Form instead of a list of all the accomplishments of the past, and I promise you that some sharp minister will hear God’s call!

Now is the time to look at the sky and ask what God wants for us now? Now is always a good time to trust God, to ask where Christ is leading. Let’s be ready to jettison every small thing that weighs us down and keeps us from keeping up with the One who leads us. The present tense is calling us to trust that Christ will point us in the direction to follow so we have a future with Christ. If we are followers, what other future would we want?

The sins of parents are visited on children. We teach our children the same skills. We overbook them, over stimulate them, over program them until they are so busy they don't have time to play. We don't say "no" to them, so they learn to say "no." We have to teach them how to be frantic, distracted, and frustrated. We want them prepared for life. We want them to handle it better than we do.

To paraphrase the old hymn #121, "I lift my eyes from my to-do list and calendar. Where will my help come? Not from the calendar or the to-do list. Our help comes from the Lord, who managed to make heaven and earth in a week or so, give or take 14 billion years.

Reading the New Testament, we see that those first followers did not say "yes" to following and then keep their lives the same. They did not just add church on Sunday when there wasn't a conflict. Saying "yes" to Christ meant saying "no" to lots of things they had done before they said yes to Christ. Committing to the BIG things makes it easier to say no to the smaller things.

I will admit to you that the church has not done a good job of helping you learn to say no to little things because you have said yes to the one big thing of being a follower. We Presbyterians do not say "no" to small things very easily. We over-extend church resources like a slice of butter to a whole loaf. And we all think that there is always someone to do something that we do not want to do.

We are more inclined to the "7 Word Sentence" than to the 8 Word Question: "We've always done it that way before." is our basic approach, but it is a sentence that makes us look back and limits us to the way we have done it before. We need to ask the 8 word question every time we hear the 7 word sentence: "What do we need to be doing now?" Asking about now puts us in the present tense and opens us to what we have not done before.

We Presbyterians have a hard time giving things up – even the things that no one comes to anymore, or the things that no one can remember why we are still doing them. We Presbyterians are good at adding something new that someone wants, so long as I don't lose anything I want. We think that if we just keep working harder at the same things, different things will happen. "Keep on keeping on" was the hymn the Pharisees sang until they could not see the Messiah they longed for standing right in front of them. That mentality leads to the 9 Word epitaph, "We stayed the same until we closed the door."

We must let our commitment to follow Christ help us to say no to some things, lead us to do other things differently. And we need to ask each person to be committed to follow. We need to be honest about the way that every person at a church is needed just to do the core, big things.

An Interim season is a good time to stop doing some things, to focus on doing the core, big things better. An interim is a chance to make saying "no" to little things easier. An interim is a good time to ask for commitment by everyone, and ask people to say "no" to something else.

Instead of asking "how can we keep on keeping on the way we have always done it before with all these problems?," we could ask, "What do we need to be doing now?" An interim in-between season is time to look with Christ at our present and ask: What do you think would be the best change Northwood could make now to serve God in the next ten years?

- Maybe we could teach people to do more by doing less?

now” or the “put it on the card.” I don’t mean our society’s habit of getting benefits and letting the next generation pay for it because we are a “don’t raise my taxes” society. Those are problems, but not the problem.

What I mean is what Jesus is saying to his generation of people who thought they were entitled to all the benefits of being God’s chosen and protected. They thought all the troubles in their lives were someone else’s failure. And all the time these people did not think they had to do the things that God’s chosen were required to do to fulfill their calling. God was supposed to understand. After all, their favorite chorus in the hymnbook said God was “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

Instead Jesus said they all had a choice to make that shaped all the other choices. They had to live like the chosen, and that meant other choices. He commanded, “Follow me.” By following, most of the other decisions – and the divisions – would fall into place. Thinking we can be followers without following is ignoring the obvious. Anyone who reads through the book of Luke once can see that following means making some hard decisions.

We don’t see the signs of the times because we choose to ignore the obvious. We live explaining how we like it more than how it is. We have a good June with lots of rain and cooler breezes, and we forget this is Texas, and we will see 90 in October. Black clouds in the west mean rain. No clouds mean scorching heat. We can read the sky. It is hard to imagine cool. Why can’t we look honestly at the times? Why don’t we use the text to interpret the times?

An Interim season is a different time. It is a time to look at the past, present, and future. But succeeding in between the seasons of pastorates is dependent upon asking about the signs of the times in the present. The main task of an Interim pastor is what Jesus was saying to the crowd that day: look at the signs of the times, look in the present tense. Of course, we look with some trust in God. We look with the eyes we have from the one decision we have made to follow Christ. We are called to see the present circumstances through the lens of trust in Christ’s leading and our following.

What are the dominating circumstances that appear to control us in the present tense? How can we see them differently if we see we are standing on the side of the division with Christ?

In the world and at the church, a lot of us are focused on finances these days. Are financial problems the big problem? Not really. The deeper problem is time. Not enough time at the church is the issue. There is a limit to time – 24 hours in a day. Not a sudden “crisis.” The real issue for all of us is not-enough-time, which really means that we have too much to do and too little time for the doing.

Every present tense is different from any past tense. Jesus is saying we only live in the present tense, and it is as easy to see the obvious in the present as it is to read the sky. We can read the sky, but can’t seem to read the signs in the limits of the day. We can’t seem to say “no,” and we can’t seem to say “yes.” We have overcommitted ourselves and our families until there is no way on earth to do everything we can do, and we stay guilty because we don’t do much of anything well. We just can’t seem to say “no.” And we have reached the place where we cannot say “yes” to anything else, because we have said yes to everything.

Explaining Away the Obvious
Lessons: Isaiah 5:1-7, Luke 12:49-56

Jesus said, “I came to bring fire on earth.” The lessons assigned for today are “hard lessons.” They are lessons of judgment and decision. We prefer the “sweet Jesus, meek and mild” and want to pass over or rationalize these times. Jesus says he did not come to bring us peace; he came to divide families by the decisions they make to accept or reject him. He says that we can predict the weather, but we do not see the obvious signs in the human living all around us.

Why is it that we Christians in churches every Sunday do not want to hear any other words except these kinds of messages? Why do we want ignore the time, explain away the obvious problems? I suspect there are two factors in the church that make it hard for us hear Jesus’ hard words or make it easy for us to explain away the obvious problems in these times.

First, we (most all us Christians) have for 50 years made people think that coming to church and listening to the text on Sunday morning is a substitute for reading the text ourselves. Now we are afraid of the Bible. We think these “hard sayings” are strange because we don’t read how many of them there are in Jesus’ words.

Second, we (most all us preachers) have avoided preaching on the texts that make their congregations uncomfortable. We Christians and we preachers don’t like the fire and brimstone sermons. We come to church for help and support for our present life and current problems. We don’t like either a preacher or Jesus to tell us that the problem is us, and we need to change our lives.

For both those reasons, I am always uncomfortable with these texts, and I am especially uncomfortable standing in a pulpit, high and looking down on you, with “the Word of the Lord, ...thanks be to God.”

Let me move down a couple of steps and sit on a stool instead of standing in a pulpit. Let me share with you how I struggle with the hard sayings, and how I refuse to ignore or explain them away.

Jesus said, “I came to bring fire on earth.” There was a fire, a passion, a calling in him that was more important to him than family ties, or keeping friends close, or even world peace. Jesus had his focus on something greater than the times, more important than the circumstances. Something to Jesus was more important than families in harmony, or everyone getting along, and that something was the ruler he used to draw a line of division.

“I came to bring division.” Jesus says there are choices to be made, and we survive and thrive by making the right choices. Jesus lived seeking God’s rule first. He shows and commands that same choice to others. Jesus says that the choice to follow him has consequences. Saying yes to him means saying no to other things. Choices follow from the following.

We live in a world that keeps saying we can make the right choices and still have everything we want. We have been convince that living a good life does not mean we say no to “the good life.” We want it all, and assume it is possible. I don’t mean the instant gratification of “right