

PROPER 21 A

Matthew 21:23-32

### **From No to Yes**

The gospel: one son said no but, for one reason or another, sooner or later – how much later we do not know – gave a yes.

And that is my entre into observing that history is full of indifferent, weak, hostile, and wicked people who, regarding goodness, conversion, love, God, like the son in today's gospel – sooner or later – went **from no to yes!**

For starters, there were the **no's** to the **yes's** of Peter who denied, Thomas who doubted, and Paul who persecuted, but, nearer to our times, I want to share four **“no to yes”** stories. Let's start with the mocker.

The bishop of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris during the early part of the last century was a great evangelizer. He tried to reach out to unbelievers, scoffers, and cynics. One of the stories he liked to tell was that of a young man who would stand outside of the cathedral and shout derogatory slogans at the people entering to worship. He would call them fools, brainwashed, stupid, and all kinds of names. The people tried to ignore him, but it was difficult.

One day the parish priest went outside to confront the young man,

much to the apprehension of the parishioners.

The young man ranted and raved against everything the priest told him.

Finally, the priest addressed the young scoffer by saying,

***“Look, let’s get this over with once and for all.***

***I’m going to have your do something and I bet you can’t do it.”***

And, of course, the young man shot back,

***“I can do anything you propose, you black-robed wimp!”***

***“Fine.”*** Said the priest.

All I ask you to do is come into the sanctuary with me,

I want you to stare at the figure of Christ on the cross

and I want you to scream at the very top of your lungs

as loudly as you can,

***‘Christ died on the cross for me and I don’t give a damn!’”***

So, the young man went defiantly into the cathedral,

approached the sanctuary and, looking at the face of Jesus,

screamed as loud as he could, ***“Christ died on the cross for me***

***and I don’t give a damn!”***

The priest said, ***“Very good. Now do it again.”***

And again, the young man, looking at the face on the cross,

this time with a shadow of hesitancy, shouted,

***“Christ died on the cross for me and I don’t give a damn!”***

***“Your almost done now,”*** said the priest. ***“One more time.”***

The young man raised his fist, kept looking at the face of the cross ...

but the words would not come.

He could not look at the face and say that anymore.

The real punch line came when, after he had told the story, the bishop said,

***“I was that young man. That defiant young man was me.***

***I thought I didn’t need God but found out that I did.”***

### **From no to yes!**

Tom Phillips was the CEO of a large company.

He had everything: a Mercedes, a beautiful home, a lovely family.

He was a man of influence and moved in high circles.

But Tom was not happy. In fact, he was downright unhappy.

Something was missing from his life, but he didn’t know what it was.

But one night he had a religious experience that changed him forever.

Later he said,

***“I saw what was missing from my life. It was Jesus Christ.”***

I’m not interested in him but in an acquaintance of his

who at the time was the second most powerful man in the United States.

Go back to the Nixon years.

Nixon’s Number Two man was Charles Colson who used to brag

that he would run over his grandmother to get Nixon elected,

and that he had an office next to the President of the United States,

a six-figure income, a yacht, a limousine, and a chauffeur.

But secretly he, too, was an unhappy man  
with a growing hollowness within him.

Something was missing in his life too, but he didn't know what it was.

Well, as fate would have it, one August night in 1973,  
Phillips had Colson over for dinner and, in the course of the evening,  
told him about his conversion. The more Colson listened,  
the more he became convinced that Phillips  
had put his finger on what was causing the hollowness deep inside him.

When Colson left the Phillip's home that night,  
he hadn't driven 100 yards from the house when he pulled up  
alongside the road and began to cry so loudly  
that he was afraid the Phillip's family might hear him.

Describing what happened next, Colson said,

***"I prayed my first real prayer. It went like this....***

***"God. I don't know how to find you, but I am going to try!***

***I'm not much the way I am, but somehow,***

***I want to give myself to you."*** Then he added,

***"I didn't know how to say any more, so I repeated over and over  
the words, "Find me, find me, find me!"***

And the Lord did, and he responded. **A long no to yes!**

Finally, Sister May Rose McGready, former head of Covenant House,

tells a similar story. Here are her words.

Kate came to our front door Tuesday morning,  
ragged with dirty clothes on her back –  
and a little aluminum paint can in her arms.

From the second she stepped inside; she made it clear to us  
that she and that paint can were **“a package deal.”**

Whatsoever she did or wherever she went, the little paint can  
never left her hands.

When Kathy sat in the crisis center, the can sat in her arms.

She took the can with her to the cafeteria that first morning  
and to bed with her that first night.

When she stepped into the shower, the can was only a few feet away.

When she dressed, the can rested alongside her feet.

**“I’m sorry, this is mine,”** she told our counselors  
whenever we were asked about it. **“This can, belongs to me.”**

**“Do you want to tell me what’s in it, Kathy?”** I asked.

**“Umm, not today,”** she’d say, and then quietly walk off.

When Kathy was sad or angry or hurt – which happened a lot –

She took her paint can to a quiet room on the third floor.

Many times, I’d pass by her room

and watch her rock gently back and forth, the can in her arms.

Sometimes she would talk to the paint can in low whispers.

Early one morning I decided to **“accidentally”** run into Kathy.

**“Would you like to join me for breakfast?”** I asked.

**“That would be great,”** she said.

We sat in a corner talking quietly over the din of 150 hungry kids.

Then I took a deep breath and plunged into it.

**“Kathy, that is really a nice can, What’s in it?”**

For a long time, Kathy didn’t answer.

She rocked back and forth, her black hair swaying across her shoulders.

Then she looked at me, tears in her eyes. **“It’s my mother,”** she said.

**“Oh,”** I said, **“What do you mean, it’s your mother?”**

**“It’s my mother’s ashes,”** she said,

**“I went and got them from the funeral home.**

**See, I even asked them to put a label right here on the side.**

**It has her name on it.”**

Kathy held up the can before my eyes.

A little label on the side chronicled all that remained of her mother:

date of birth, date of death, name. That was it.

Then Kathy pulled the can close and hugged it.

**“I never knew my mother, Sister,”** Kathy told me.

**“I mean she threw me in the garbage two days after I was born.**

*I ended up living in lots of foster homes, mad at my mother.*

*But then I decided I was going to try to find her,*

*I got lucky – someone knew where she was living.*

*She wasn't there, Sister. My mother was in the hospital.*

*She had AIDS.*

*I went to the hospital, and I got to meet her the day before she died.*

*My mother told me that she loved me, Sister," Kathy said crying.*

*"That's why I went to get her ashes."*

I reached out and hugged Kathy, and she cried in my arms for a long time.

It was tough getting my arms around her

because she just wouldn't put the paint can down. But no one minded.

### **Two no's moved to yes!**

A mother who said **no** to a two-day-old daughter.

A daughter who said **no** to a mother who had abandoned her.

But on a deathbed, a '**yes**' emerged from both mother and daughter!

I think we want to meditate on these stories and how they deeply and profoundly tell us the gospel message.

The message is that the past can be reversed.

The mocker could say **yes** to Jesus hanging on the cross for him.

A politician could cry out "**Find me! Find me!**"

after a life of lies and deceit

and Kathy could hear those words she so ardently desired.

**From no to yes! ....**

However long it takes, the everlasting mercy of Jesus is always there.

It is there for us too. Amen.