Just Say No…Or Yes

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Sermon

At David’s first sermon-writing seminar, he told us that a worthwhile sermon must have several elements. It must have personal references and relevance. It must contain elements that concern spiritual or societal benefit, and each section of the sermon must have a relationship to the others.

When I was offered this opportunity, I decided to challenge myself. Since I truly believe that everything in life is related to everything else, I decided to take the first four things that came into my head and to find their societal or spiritual relationship. Those four things were: the demise of American values, M&M’s, The Wizard of Oz, and “Just say no.” At the end of this presentation you should know if I am a committed person or if maybe I just should be committed.

“If you bungle raising your children, I don't think whatever else you do matters very much.”

Jackie Kennedy

“Become so wrapped up in something that you forget to be afraid.”

Lady Bird Johnson

“The search for human freedom can never be complete without freedom for women.”

Betty Ford

“A leader takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don't necessarily want to go, but ought to be.”

Rosalynn Carter

“Just say no.”

Nancy Reagan

Don’t get me wrong; I still think this statement from Nancy Reagan is as vapid today as it was in 1981, when she made it. But if you take it out of the context that she intended and think about it, it is every bit as valuable as any of the quotes from first ladies who preceded her; serendipitous as that may be.

Of course, you also have to have the option of just saying “yes.” In my life, I seem to get into trouble when I can’t resist saying more than no or yes.

I don’t know why I do it, but someone (usually a friend, but political adversary) will ask me a question that I know full well has no answer as asked, and I’ll proceed to answer the question anyway. The answer is usually so long-winded that by the time I finish I
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don’t know what I’ve said. The adversary usually responds with an equally inane volley; the conversation becomes an argument; expletives are exchanged; the wives show up and give the evil eye; we shut up; and nothing is solved.

It’s my new position that no problem in life, personal or societal, can be solved until the questions can be simplified into pieces that can be answered by “yes” or “no.” If I can train my adversaries to ask questions in that manner, then the questions they ask will make them examine their own viewpoints, and I won’t have to give incomprehensible answers to unanswerable questions.

This is not a time for complex questions, and it is not a time for complex answers. We Americans are so polarized into our own views that we have no hope of establishing dialog to solve problems unless we change the way that we address the problems. It’s time for us to examine our innermost, basic selves. That takes questions relevant to our basic humanity. When we are grounded again, we can attempt to resolve the problems that are causing us so much pain as individuals and as a nation.

Don’t be confused. This is centering and that isn’t the same thing as moving toward the middle. Moving to the middle involves compromising principles. Centering means examining firmly held opinions to affirm or refute our entrenched beliefs.

Here are some concrete examples of problems that can’t be answered without examining our core beliefs and without simplifying the issues first into questions that require yes or no answers.

We have an epidemic of grandparents raising grandchildren. At the same time, we have states across the nation changing Social Services departments from Child Protective Services to Family Protective Services to cope with the increase of abuse against the elderly. How do we reconcile the march toward Christian Conservatism over the last quarter century with this phenomenon?

We don’t do business with Cuba because it is a communist nation, while our largest trade deficit is with China. How do we rationalize this?

We have allowed marketing to become the new morality that replaces values traditionally instilled by families and communities. In turn, we are valued not by what we know or do, but by what we possess. Is there a way to put this into perspective?

Mexicans leave Mexico to take jobs that Americans won’t take because of substandard wages. Our solution is to build a 2500 mile fence. I hope I get reincarnated 5000 years from now and get to read the history of how the Great chain link of America saved Cleveland from the Mexican Vandals. The irony is that you know as well as I that the contract for that fence is going to be awarded to the lowest bidders. That contractor is going to employ illegals to increase his bottom line. They’re going to hire people whose families are trying to get here to build the fence to keep them out. That'll work! I think
we ought to build two fences a mile apart, but run them North and South through the
U.S. and into Canada. Heck; Canada’s practically empty.

I’m sure you have your own list. If not, make one.

When things are so crazy that a mother with a six year old can’t be trusted to carry
orange juice onto a plane, we are in deep doo-doo. Is it any wonder that sometimes we
feel alone, stupid, heartless, and afraid?

And both sides are saying that America has gone to Hell in a hand basket. To those
purveyors of doom, first I would say; “I’m a Universalist. I am not a neo- Christian
Universalist who believes that there is a Hell, but that it’s a reform school where
everyone gets to go and be re-educated and then gets to go to heaven. I’m a deep-
rooted Universalist. I simply don’t believe in Hell as a physical place.” Since I don’t
believe in Hell, I can’t believe I’m going there. So to those folks who are in charge of
sending me there I would ask, “Could you please arrange for me to go somewhere
else? And if it’s not too much to ask, can it be somewhere that speaks English? As for
the rest of you Americans, why are you going to Hell in a hand basket, of all things?”

Hell in a hand basket...hmmm. I think that’s one of those anachronisms that refuse to
die. The very mention of a hand basket evokes a time when life was simple and
beautiful. That little wicker basket with two wooden handles hinged at the center, being
carried to a picnic by some Barbie-bodied innocent. A gingham tablecloth forms its
lining. Inside, the basket protects the home-fried chicken, chilled potato salad,
chocolate chip cookies, and fresh fruit that will lure the cowboy in the dress jeans and
crisp white shirt into her web of wedded bliss.

Nope. I think that any self-respecting Hell-believer should choose a more appropriate
vehicle. How about, America is going to Hell in a 1974 Pinto... with a manual
transmission... and no air conditioning... Via I10 in Houston at 5:00 PM on a Friday in
August? Now that’s going to Hell in a way anyone would fear. And for those of you
who are old enough to remember that car, you'll remember that it had a reputation of
bursting into flames. I tell you, it is the perfect vehicle.

There’s a bright side to our current predicaments. It’s not the first time we’ve been in
this position as a nation. Contrary to prevailing sentiment, the left of today is not
responsible for our national ills. It has been going on for a long time. I find comfort in
knowing that we are generationally screwed up and that my generation didn’t start it.

The era that first comes to mind is the American Civil War. That’s an oxymoron, I think:
Civil war. But I digress. Our nation’s economic engine was stalled. Still an agrarian
society, roughly one half of the country needed slave labor to provide profits for the
established elite. The other side professed an abhorrence of slavery, but was unwilling
to pay the economic price of goods without it. Nor were they willing to compensate the
other side to abolish slavery. One half wanted more Federal control. The other half
wanted less. One half outrageously taxed the other. Nobody learned how to answer
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yes or no. Nobody learned to ask better questions. The result: 558,052 dead. I was going to round down to 558,000, but then I thought that maybe those 52 lives might have been important to someone.

The second generation of screw-ups surfaced after the reconstruction. The time from roughly 1870 to the early 20th century was known as the Gilded Age. The term was coined by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in their 1873 novel, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*. Our nation was still deeply in debt from the cost of the War Between the States. Grossly simplified, gilded was chosen to reflect what the society appeared to be in contrast to what it was. Something gilded is covered in gold and appears valuable. It appears to be gold. When used in societal reference, it is intended as satire to represent that a few possessing the gold spread just enough of it around to color their surroundings and make the masses think they are living a golden life. Think of it as privately-financed welfare.

Its heyday was from approximately 1874 (after the stock market panic) until approximately 1902. Vestiges remained until the beginning of The First World War. It coincided with the second industrial revolution and the largest influx of immigrants known to the United States until that time. Between 1874 and 1894, more than ten million immigrants flooded into this country. As America’s economy grew, a workforce was needed. A dichotomy existed. Immigrants were needed to fill the jobs. However, the Anglo-Saxon population was diluted farther with each wave of immigrants. As the tide of immigrants rose, attempts at labor organization rose. The Federal government came to the rescue and passed laws severely affecting the scope and legality of unions. Huge fortunes were made at the expense of the general public.

In 1899, near the end of the Gilded Age, L. Frank Baum wrote, *The Wonderful Wizard of OZ.* Originally written as a children’s book, it was almost instantly embraced by the adult population. Intellectuals, as they have been want to do, immediately seized on the contents and determined that it was a parable of the Gilded Age. Dorothy represented the innocence of America. The Munchkins were the American people. The Emerald City represented Washington D.C. (greenbacks). The mid west farmers were represented by the scarecrow. The Tin man represented the downtrodden eastern factory worker. The Lion? He was the cowardly Democratic presidential candidate, William Jennings Bryan. And the wizard was of course the incumbent president, Grover Cleveland or the Republican Presidential candidate, William McKinley.

Having read about Baum’s personal life, I believe the references to be hog wash. It is a children’s story. But the scurrilous lies serve my purposes for this presentation, so I repeat them.

Moreover, I’m pretty sick of intellectuals making up all the outrageous comparisons available. So today I start my own movement. I believe Frank Baum was a visionary. This is the modern interpretation of L. Frank Baum’s *Wonderful Wizard of OZ.*
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It is a parable of fears as we know them in our personal lives and as we know them as members of a society that we feel we have no control over.

It is a parable of the ridiculous things we do in our personal lives and in our roles as members of society.

And it is a parable of just how far we'll go in search of someone or something to take responsibility for our welfare because of fear of the unknown.

I must briefly summarize the story, as I remember it.

Dorothy, inexplicably being raised by her Auntie Em and Uncle Henry, feels rejected and runs away to find somewhere that she and her dog, Toto, will be better appreciated. A storm comes up and she tries to get back home. A tornado occurs and she is knocked unconscious. She awakens to find herself inside her house and the tornado. The house lands in a strange land and kills a witch. The witch’s sister is not pleased and threatens Dorothy. Having no attorneys in Munchkin land, Dorothy’s only defense is a pair of magic shoes and the temporary presence of a good witch inside an invincible bubble. Dorothy ignores the magic part of the explanation and just thinks the shoes are cool. None-the-less, she wants out of there and to go home. She expresses recognition that she is not in Kansas anymore.

Dorothy takes off down a yellow brick road in search of the Wizard of OZ, who she believes will get her home without any commitment required on her part. Along the way, she meets a scarecrow with no brains, a Tin man with no heart, and a lion with no courage. Being an excellent judge of character, she chooses to take these three amigos along to protect her and to help her get home.

It’s a hard trip. It is a long and winding road. There is no food, and there are no bathrooms. Dorothy’s I pod, Game boy, and cell phone had apparently been destroyed in the Tornado. The wicked witch is after them. Dorothy falls off the wagon and stops to get a buzz in a poppy field. But, at last, they make it to the land of OZ.

The wizard is not what they expect. He’s a giant flaming head with a booming voice who demands total devotion and isn’t interested in their petty needs unless they bump off the wicked witch they’ve been avoiding and bring him her broom as proof.

Off on another adventure, Dorothy and Toto are captured by the bad witch’s flying monkeys and imprisoned in a castle. The three amigos ambush some guards and sneak into the castle to rescue her. Instead, the witch catches them, too. In an effort to save the scarecrow from the fire the witch has set, Dorothy commits capital murder again; this time with a bucket of water. They take the broomstick and hurry back to Oz, only to find out that their powerful Wizard is a fraud, created by the people to give them hope. Dorothy goes ballistic and abandons any respect for him.
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The humbled wizard displays his goodness by informing each of the three amigos that he already has inside of him what he has sought on the adventure. He presents each with a symbol of his character trait so that he can never again forget that he has it. He gives the scarecrow a Th.D. degree; a degree of thinkology. To the lion he gives a medal. To the woodsman he gives a loud ticking watch so that the Tin Man can hear the heart he’s always had. As the wizard attempts to take Dorothy home via balloon, an “accident” occurs and he leaves without her, flying out of sight in a balloon that he has no idea how to control.

One last time the good witch shows up and confesses that Dorothy could have gone home before, had she read the directions that came with the shoes. She announces that the District Attorney of OZ is not going to file charges regarding the two murders and that Dorothy may go home.

Dorothy goes home.

The symbolism here is obvious. Dorothy represents our generation of children, emotionally abandoned by their parents, but who have a highly defined sense of fashion.

The tornado represents our children’s chaotic life styles of endless organized activities created so that parents won’t have to interact with them. It also represents the potential dangers if America ever considers switching from petroleum based individual transportation to a mass rapid transit system.

The good witch of the North, in her bubble, is shamefully transparent. She is symbolic of the well-intentioned do-good liberal elite who go around making people feel good while delivering nothing. The bubble is to help protect them from actually touching the people they say they’re helping.

Both wicked witches are not symbolic of anything. They are literal representations of the Conservative elites who promise nothing and give nothing. They just go around looking ugly and making threats they can’t back up.

The yellow brick road represents gold; money. If you follow it far enough, you’ll always end up in OZ.

OZ represents Washington D.C.

The scarecrow, the tin man, and the lion represent different things at different points in the story. Pre-OZ, they represent the current civilians having control over our military; clueless, heartless, and without one iota of courage. Post-OZ they represent the leadership of American corporations and universities; clueless, but with degrees; heartless, but proud of it; and cowardly, but backed by the full faith and credit of the government.
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The flying monkeys, of course, represent both the FAA and the department of Homeland Security.

The guards at the palace are symbolic of the press. They guard the interests of the oppressors until the oppressors are dead or gone and then sing about how happy they are to be free.

And finally, there is the Wizard of OZ. Before his un-masking, he represents God as He was portrayed in ancient culture and has become again in current culture. He is to be feared, not loved. He is the Santa-God that will grant all our wishes if only we believe, if only we follow the yellow brick road to its end.

After the curtain is pulled he represents what he truly is, a Unitarian. He has more questions than answers. He leads people to truths they already hold, but don’t realize. He is prone to flights of fancy, to travel to sometimes unknown destinations without regard for possible risk to him or others.

The closest we’ve ever come to a screw-up-less generation is the group that was young during World War Two. If there are any of you in the congregation today, I’d like you to be recognized. Would you be willing raise your hand if you have memories of WWII? How many of you were full grown adults?

American people and their leaders showed a commitment to basic values and the common welfare never seen before. Unfortunately, it has never been seen since, either. Private seamen committed their vessels and their lives to the merchant marines to deliver food and supplies to the Allied nations of Europe. The common public willingly accepted rationing of the basic necessities of life in order to provide troops much needed clothing, food, and ammunition. Women and minorities, still denied some of the basic liberties guaranteed under the Constitution, willingly sacrificed their lives for the good of those who would oppress them.

Young men pulled strings to get into, not out of the service. Sons of wealthy men volunteered for duty. College deferment and 4F status were badges of shame, not honor. None had “other priorities” at the time. This was one solid group of people. They had no problem just saying “no” to Fascism. The politicians may have may have expelled hot air as usual, but the people just said, “No.”

Yes, I will fight. No, I won’t give up my country to Fascism. Yes, my children can go without. It’s for their long term good. No, I won’t buy stockings on the black market. I’ll paint my legs.

But even a near perfect generation has its screw-ups.

One of theirs was Forest Mars. If the name rings a bell, it should. He was one half of the Mars candy Company. If you read the official Company web site, the introduction of M&M’s plain chocolate candies was a response to a government request for a quick
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energy snack for soldiers that would be practical in any climate. Mr. Mars claimed to have gotten the idea from visiting soldiers during the Spanish Civil War and witnessing them with home-made chocolate candies coated in a sugar crust.

But, according to the confectionary timetable, M&M's were developed in response to a slump in chocolate sales that occurred every summer and was exacerbated by the war in Europe.

According to his obituary, M&M's were not a result of witnessing soldiers in the Spanish Civil War. They were a traditional candy in England. The Company had been making them since 1932 for the European market.

By 1941, Forest Mars was one of the richest men in America. He negotiated a deal with the U.S. Government to include M&M's in every K-ration, at severely reduced cost. In doing so, he was able to make up for slumping European sales while introducing the candy to the US market under the guise of patriotism. It was one of the most successful and clandestine marketing campaigns in American history.

Like the screw-ups before him, Mr. Mars showed no intelligence. People in peril are easy to fool. He showed no heart. His successful sales program helped only himself. He showed no courage. There was no sacrifice for the common good.

I hope that, during the term of our interim ministry, you will encourage the continuation of the open pulpit. More, I hope that you will participate. It’s not about how smart you are. I’ve proven that today. It’s not about the courage to stand up here. You will receive all the help and encouragement you need from your group. It is about you coming to understand that the rest of us care about and respect your passions and experiences; your beliefs and disbeliefs. So, when approached for this opportunity, don’t say no and then give a hundred reasons why you can’t. Just say, “Yes.” No more, just “yes.”