24th Sunday in Ordinary Time: 9/11/22—9:30 and 11:30 AM

I asked our eighth graders to list some of the most powerful words they could think of, and they listed words like “strength,” “rule,” “force,” “the president,” “teachers,” “electricity,” “parents,” and the like. One even wrote “Ms. Doherty,” our school principal. But it strikes me that the two most powerful words of all are both single syllable words: “Yes” and “No.” Think of the power that these two words carry. Today’s Gospel describes so well the battle between these two words. That battle begins with this comment by the scribes and Pharisees, ***“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them,”*** basically a “No.” No, don’t do that, don’t eat with them, they are nasty people, don’t waste your time with them, don’t have anything to do with them. How does Jesus respond? He not only disregards their advice; he challenges their “No” with three overwhelmingly powerful parables of “Yes.”

Put in terms of “Yes” and “No,” what is happening in these parables? Think of that lost sheep as a “No,” a person who consciously chooses to leave the flock. What does Jesus the shepherd do? He is a “Yes” who goes over hill and dale to track down that sheep, that “No,” then he lovingly hoists it on his shoulders and throws a party because he has found that “No” and turned it into a “Yes.” Think of that lost coin as a person who also is a “No.” What does Jesus, the “Yes,” do in the person of that woman? He scrupulously scourers every inch of that house until he finds that “No” turning it too from a “No” to a “Yes.” But the most extreme illustration of a “Yes” versus a “No” is Jesus’ story of what we call the parable of the prodigal son. That son is a very dramatic “No,” a “No” with an exclamation point, yet the father, who is a “Yes” also with an exclamation, point runs to him, embraces him, kisses him, lavishes new clothes on him, puts a ring on this finger and sandals on his feet, plus he throws a party from him. The father, a “Yes,” is overjoyed because his younger son has been turned into a “Yes.” The same thing too with the older son, he too is a “No.” Yet the father, a “Yes,” invites that son to become a “Yes” as well. However, that story isn’t finished as with that younger son; yet the father, a “Yes,” is hoping to turn that “No,” that older son, into a “Yes” as well.

What is the bottom line about this chapter 15 of St. Luke’s Gospel? The bottom line is that our God in the person of his Son, Jesus, is a “Yes” and that Jesus, his “Yes,” has been sent to turn each one of us, we who are “No’s,” into “Yeses.” A good question for us is how am I doing? Am I tending to be a “Yes” or tending to be a “No”? How do I, a “No,” still need to encounter Jesus, the Father’s “Yes”? What aspects of my life are still “No”? Where and how do I need Jesus, the Father’s eternal “Yes,” to turn me, a partial “Yes,” into a more complete “Yes”?

Last weekend, I heard a most interesting quote. It was by Oscar Hammerstein II who collaborated with Richard Rodgers for many great musicals such as “Oklahoma,” “South Pacific,” “The King and I,” and “The Sound of Music.” Oscar Hammerstein is quoted as saying in 1951, a long time ago, ***“It is a modern tragedy that despair has so many spokesmen, and hope has so few.”*** How true! If we look around ourselves today, I think we’d all agree that his words are truer nowadays than when he first spoke them some seventy years ago, ***“It is a modern tragedy that despair has so many spokesmen, and hope has so few.”*** As followers of Jesus, the ultimate “Yes,” we must be proclaimers of hope, for that hope, who is Jesus, is the “Yes” that our world so greatly needs to hear and so greatly needs to experience.

The composer Oscar Hammerstein once said, ***“It is a modern tragedy that despair has so many spokesmen, and hope [has] so few.”*** In Edward R. Murrow, *This I Believe* (radio program), Jan. 1, 1951, [**prx.org**](https://prx.org/). as quoted by Lloyd Newell in the Music and the Spoken Word broadcast on 8/28/2022