

The first time  
I heard the phrase  
“Yes man”  
was when I was  
allowed to stay up  
late enough  
to watch Johnny Carson.  
One of my parents,  
I don’t remember which,  
called Ed McMahon a yes man  
because his job, it seemed,  
was to laugh at anything  
Johnny said and to  
agree with him loudly and often.

Oh, I thought, he’s an Eddie Haskell!  
For any of you old enough  
to remember the old sitcom  
Leave It to Beaver,  
Eddie Haskell was in some ways,  
a yes man.  
Literally oozing with  
false charm and manners  
Eddie always greeted  
Mrs. Cleaver with a smile  
and a positive spin.

Once she was gone, however,  
he reverted right back  
to his own natural, dishonest self.  
He was always saying yes, but practicing no.

Jesus today tells a story  
of a man with two sons.  
One son is a yes man.  
His father asks him to do something  
and the son  
courteously and respectfully

says yes to going  
to the vineyard  
but does not go.

The other son,  
scandalously says no,  
but in a moment  
of conversion changes his mind,  
or his heart,  
and does in fact go to the vineyard.

So we can see from our own lives,  
And from this brief  
but loaded gospel  
is that it is much easier  
to be God's yes man,  
or yes woman  
than it is to actually do God's will.

This hit home for me  
when I spend a year or so  
working as a chaplain  
in Arlington, VA.  
All day long I would hear  
the other chaplains,  
staff and patients saying  
"I'll pray for you."  
I started to say it all the time too,  
until it began to feel  
too lightly said,  
not as intentional  
as I wanted.

I'll pray for you is a good phrase,  
but it is comprised of yes words  
– words I still use and love,  
but words that are often  
the parting words  
of a promise not meant or kept.

Fearing that I was saying  
the words more often  
than I was actually doing them,  
I began to keep  
a small notebook with me  
at all times  
so that I could write down  
the people I had promised  
to pray for.

By the end of the day  
I had notes and names  
to ponder and pray,  
but I still felt I had missed  
the point or wasn't quite  
providing all that I could  
as a chaplain.

“What are you waiting for?”  
my mentor asked.  
“Why tell someone  
you're going to pray for them –  
do right now.  
Pray with them in the moment.

Even a silent prayer  
offered up to God  
while you are  
with that person  
shows that you have arrived  
at the vineyard,  
ready to work.”

What I needed,  
and still need  
is for God to give me  
the grace to live the yes,  
and live it now.

Jesus asked,

“Which of the two  
did the will of his father?  
They said, “The first.”  
Jesus said to them,  
“Truly I tell you,  
the tax collectors  
and the prostitutes  
are going into  
the kingdom of God  
ahead of you.

For John came to you  
in the way of righteousness  
and you did not believe him,  
but the tax collectors  
and the prostitutes  
believed him;  
and even after you saw it,  
you did not change your minds  
and believe him.

You see,  
the chief priests and scribes  
thought they were the  
epitome of good living.  
They were holy,  
they not only knew the law,  
but they could shape it,  
apply it, judge others by its light.

Yet here Jesus was  
saying that the lowest,  
most reviled members  
of society were going  
to enter the kingdom of God  
ahead of them.  
This was a shocking  
and colossal reversal of order.  
The hoodlums were  
Moving to the head of the line.

I've been thinking  
A lot about standing in line  
this week  
after a silly incident that happened  
at a discount store.  
It was one of those stores  
where the registers don't have lanes.

There is no clear way  
to queue up  
for the registers  
and so every time I've gone  
I've approached the lanes with care.  
The time before  
When I was at this store,  
It has been easy.

Each register had a line  
In front of it, comprised of people  
waiting to be helped.  
Nice and simple  
This last time,  
there was one line  
and the person at the end  
of the line would approach  
whichever register  
came available first.

So, seeing this,  
I took my place  
at the end of the line  
and every few minutes  
I would bump up a spot  
as the shoppers  
in front of me  
took their turns.  
Finally, I was at  
the front of the line,  
waiting for one of

the three registers  
to open up.

Each one seemed  
to be having problems.  
At one register  
the lady buying a new suit  
wanted to talk  
at length  
about the suit's lovely shade  
of purple and what she  
might wear with it.

At another register  
a frazzled man  
kept pulling out  
card after card,  
hoping one would go through  
and be accepted.  
The third register  
had a woman  
with a big stack of clothes and shoes.

And so I waited,  
reminding myself  
that patience is a virtue,  
when a man approached the  
register area.

Now, gentlemen,  
I don't mean this  
as any sort of offense  
to your gender.  
I think you are all wonderful  
and I applaud any man  
who is out shopping for himself  
– but I don't think you all  
always know all the shopping protocols  
and the various unspoken rules  
associated with paying for purchases.

I looked at the man.  
He looked a little lost,  
a little frustrated and in a hurry.  
“Uh, oh,” I thought.

I knew immediately  
that this gentleman  
wanted to go around me  
and form a new line.  
I was not only  
the front of the line,  
I was the end  
of the line too.

It might look to him  
like I was standing in line  
for one specific register.  
He might attempt  
to go around me  
to another register  
if one opened up,  
not realizing I had paid my dues  
by waiting in this line  
for so long.

He kept looking at me  
and then looking  
at all the registers.  
I felt myself get anxious.  
This man was going to cut in line –  
he was going to take my place  
at a register and  
beat me out of this store.  
What would I do if he did?  
Would I confront him,  
tell him that I was next?  
That seemed rude,  
and not quite  
in keeping with my, er, vocation.

I told myself  
I should be above all this.  
On the other hand,  
I'd been waiting  
for a long time.  
It wouldn't be fair  
if he jumped ahead of me.

So ladies,  
I decided to try  
the universal signal for  
"I'm next in line, buddy,  
so you'd better stay back."  
I opened my purse  
and took out my debit card  
and visibly fiddled with it  
so he would see  
that I was ready to go,  
and next in line.

Bless him,  
he recognized the signal,  
got behind me  
and didn't try to wrestle me  
to the floor  
when the lady with the stack of shoes  
finally gathered up her bag  
and vacated her spot  
at register number 3.

Now, what bothers me most  
about this little story  
is how tense I felt  
at losing my place in line.  
The possibility of his changing  
the status quo  
and taking my place  
bothered me.  
Such a silly, little thing.

Such a little thing.

But it helps me to imagine  
Just how the priests and scribes  
Might have felt  
at their systems being upset,  
and their places being usurped  
by the undeserving.

Jesus is telling them,  
you know you've been  
in line for a long while,  
but the line belongs to me  
and I'm bringing those  
who have had  
a conversion of heart  
to the place of honor,  
to the head of the line.

The tax collectors  
and the prostitutes  
along with fisherman,  
women, children,  
farmers and others  
had heard John the Baptist's  
words of repentance  
and they had responded.  
They were like the son  
who said no to his father,  
but who later changed  
his heart and did his father's will.

The "no" that lived in their heart  
was converted into  
lives that proclaimed  
"yes, lord, yes."

And so it is they  
who will stand in line  
at the door to the kingdom,

it is they who exhibit  
a righteous life,  
an example to follow.  
Because they did not  
merely put on the appearance  
of following God,  
the guise of discipleship ...  
they embodied it  
by changing, repenting  
and becoming a vessel  
shaped by the will of God.

And that gives me hope.  
Jesus is not asking the impossible.  
He does not ask that we are perfect,  
that we respond yes every time.  
But He is asking that  
when we are presented with the truth,  
when we are presented with his will,  
we convert our hearts  
so full of the word no  
and exchange them  
right then  
for lives that proclaim yes.

Lord God,  
Give us the grace  
to convert our willful  
answers of no  
into a joyful chorus of yes.

Bend us to your will  
and give us hearts  
that repents for  
ever saying "no"  
and send our feet  
speeding toward the vineyard.

Amen.

