

August 25, 2024 Prpr 16 When We Say No

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Have you ever met God in a grocery store? It happened to a man named Jerry Landers in the 1977 movie *Oh, God!* based on the book with the same title. Jerry found God, who looked like an old man wearing a fishing hat and raincoat, browsing the cereal aisle, reading the ingredients, complaining about all the chemicals in cereals, and lamenting those chemicals were “turning children into garbage cans.” This encounter was actually the third time God and Jerry spoke in the movie, which is a story about the relationship between God and one person God asked to share a message God wanted the people of the earth to remember: it is possible to make it work, and we have to make it work.

But when Jerry and God spoke the first time, Jerry wasn't ready to share this message because he didn't have a relationship with God, so God appeared several times, had several conversations with Jerry, and each time, Jerry chose to listen and engage with God. Even when God said something Jerry found difficult to understand, he kept listening, kept choosing to stay engaged, which is how he grew closer to God and found the strength and courage to share God's message with the world.

While it is a lot of fun watching their relationship grow, God's message was not accepted by everyone who heard it. In fact, most characters in the movie, with some exceptions of course, rejected both the message and Jerry who at the end of the movie lost his job.

Of course, that rejection hurt, but it didn't make Jerry change his mind. It helped him mature both personally and as a person of faith. God assured Jerry there are other places to live and other jobs and no matter what happened next, God was always going to be listening, even though God wouldn't appear to him in the same way.

There is also rejection in today's Gospel reading, which is the end of the long discourse Jesus gave on being the Bread of Life in John's Gospel which we've been examining in bits for the last five weeks. One preacher called this long chapter of John, “the Bread Talk no wanted nor asked for”, because it can get tedious for preachers to preach on it for so many Sundays, as it can be for those engaged in Bible study to find new insights. Not only is it repetitive, but as was mentioned in today's Gospel, it was difficult to accept. Not only to mentally comprehend, but it was considered offensive to many who had been following Jesus. So offensive, they walked away.

What might seem even more difficult for us reading this Gospel today to understand is why Jesus let all those people go. If Jesus is so powerful, like Paul suggests in the second reading we heard today, why didn't Jesus stop them from leaving? Isn't a shrinking crowd size a sign of weakness or failure? Why didn't he command the people to return instead of turning to his core group and asking them if they were going to leave him too? We can almost hear Jesus' heartbreak, disappointment, and sadness in that question ringing with the sting of rejection.

In the movie *Oh, God!*, when Jerry first met God, he asked God a similar question about God's power. “If you're really God”, Jerry asked, “How can you permit all the suffering in the world?” God responded by stating God is not the one who permits suffering, we human beings are. It's part of free will and how we choose to live in a world where God gave us everything we need, including each other. Like in our first reading this morning, following God is our choice, a choice that also means we can choose to love, care for, and nurture each other or harm each other.

One of the reasons I appreciate the movie *Oh, God!* is because of how it handles the truth God didn't make us puppets whose actions and words are the results of God pulling strings or pushing buttons control us. Participating in life and relationships requires making choices and decisions, as well as accepting and dealing with how others respond or react to those choices and actions. Sometimes our choices and actions are initiated by our inner desires, values, and curiosities, and sometimes they are

initiated by outside forces we don't have any control over. This ability to choose can be powerful. And that power is God's gift to us. And we can choose to be in relationship with God, or not. God loves us so much God does not want to control us, God lets us choose to love God back, or not. God will let us say no when God invites or calls us to deeper relationship with God or each other, and Jesus embodies this characteristic of God by letting people walk away when what he said was too much for them to swallow.

Even though the rejection hurt, Jesus did not appear to measure his success by the number of people who hung around after his long Bread of Life talk. He just kept extending the invitation to participate to be part of the life he brings even if it was to a smaller group. Life that is about growing closer to God through Jesus, by embodying Jesus inside and out, as Paul described in the second reading for today. Following Jesus isn't only about participating in the Eucharist, letting Christ nourish our souls, we are invited to put Jesus on and wear him like clothing.

I have heard and read criticisms about the reading from Ephesians we had as our second reading today because Paul described putting Jesus on as pieces of military armor and therefore suggested following Jesus is a military pursuit justifying violence. But I suspect Paul was using images the people he was writing to would be familiar with. When Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Ephesus, he and they were living under the governance and government of Rome, which was known for its powerful military. Rome kept peace by military force and violence, and armor was very common, something everyone would have been familiar with. Armor has more than one purpose. Its most practical purpose is to protect the person wearing it. But armor can also identify a person's rank, role, and intention. In suggesting Christians clothe themselves in Christ, Paul was not suggesting Christians make literal shields and helmets. He was suggesting thinking about Jesus as both source of our life and how we engage with others by reflecting Jesus into the world. To consider making our decisions, whether they are initiated by our inner values or desires or by outside events we cannot control, through our relationship with God through Jesus. For example, we can think of Jesus as a way to deflect harmful systems, by letting Jesus inform our decision to participate in those systems or not. In choosing how we spend our time, our money, how we share our gifts, to remember how and what we choose could reflect Jesus to others. And to remember our ability to choose, to make decisions, comes from God. And we can show respect to people by respecting their choices, just like Jesus showed us in today's Gospel.

While rejection definitely hurts, it is not necessarily the end. God will let us say no, and God will invite us again, and with every invitation, we have the choice to listen, even to teachings that are tediously repetitive, or difficult to swallow, we can ask questions, we can reflect, and pray, and through it all grow so close to God we might discover God has indeed been with us in places we didn't expect, in ways we didn't anticipate, even if God was somehow in an elderly man wearing a fishing hat and raincoat in a grocery store.